

# The HOUSE of HAPPINESS

KATE LANGLEY BOSHER






Eva Hunt.







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[See page 253]

"NOT TO-DAY—NOT FOR MANY DAYS, PERHAPS"

# THE HOUSE OF HAPPINESS

BY  
KATE LANGLEY BOSHER

AUTHOR OF  
"MARY CARY" ETC.



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TO THE LOVED MEMORY OF  
MY FATHER AND MY MOTHER  
CHARLES H. AND PORTIA V. LANGLEY



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# THE HOUSE OF HAPPINESS





# THE HOUSE OF HAPPINESS

## I

### CRICKET

“PLEASE, mister, would you mind telling me what time it is?”

The man walking along the road lifted his head. No one was in front of him. He turned slowly. No one was behind. On the left of the road the land sloped abruptly to a narrow, lazy little stream; on the right it rose in hills of varying heights, but neither on the hills nor in the valley, nor on the winding way, was human being to be seen.

“Here I am, mister.” A laugh came back in joyous echo. “‘Tain’t five yet, is it?”

Half-way up the hill, and half hidden among its trees, on the top rail of a worm fence the boy was sitting; at his feet a willow basket,

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round and hand-woven, on his head a hat of straw with crown half out and brim in ragged edges, and at his side a fishing-rod. Hardly knowing why, the man climbed the hill.

"I don't know the time," he said. "It takes so long to pass I put my watch away. I don't think it's five."

Again the boy laughed; and, dropping the bunch of leaves he was holding, leaves of green and gold and russet red, he took off his hat and held it in his hands.

"Reckon you just come." The stranger was surveyed with frank and friendly eyes. "You're one of 'em, ain't you?"

"One what?"

"Tubers. You don't look like a Rester. Since they built the new house up there"—a hand was waved indefinitely into space—"they have more Resters than Tubers. Miss Taska is a Tuber. Do you know Miss Taska?"

The man shook his head. "No, I don't know anybody."

The boy moved up and made room on the fence. "Won't you sit down? I'm sitting here so I can see Mis' Roberts's back yard and front yard at the same time. My name's Josephus Hammill, but they call me Cricket. Nice day, ain't it?"

## CRICKET

For a moment the man hesitated, then got up on the fence. Why not? There was nothing to do with time but kill it, and if he went back to the sanitarium— He turned to the boy at his side. "Do you live around here?"

"Over there." A long brown finger was pointed across the stream toward a tree-encircled hollow. "I live with Mis' Lemmon. She took me when my aunt died. I used to live with my grandmother, but she died, too. Everybody I ever belonged to died. My mother and father died because they got drowned. Mis' Lemmon says it was the will of God, but 'twarn't. Jim Gibson was asleep when they passed by and didn't tell 'em he hadn't fixed the bridge over Falling Creek, which was all swelled up on account of the rain, and they drove on, not knowing it was bad, and they went through, horse and buggy and all. The horse was theirs, but the buggy was borrowed. I ain't blood kin to anybody now. What's your name, mister?"

"Rives Colburn."

"Look like you live in New York. Do you?"

"No. I live in the South."

The boy turned toward him. "Miss Taska lives in the South. I reckon you're stopping up at Baywood. How long you been there?"

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"Five days."

"Like it?"

"I do not. I most certainly do not."

"Whole lot of things folks have to do what they don't like. There's me and milking. How long you're going to stay?"

"God knows!"

The bitterness in the man's voice silenced the child, and he looked away. "Reckon if He knows that's enough to know," he said, presently, "and you can fish, can't you? They won't let the Resters fish when they first come, but the Tubers who are getting well can. Miss Taska and I go every Saturday Mis' Lemmon lets me off. She brings the lunch. Feed fine up there, don't they?"

With narrowed eyes the man was looking at the handsome buildings on top of a hill some distance off, and swift loathing for what they represented surged over him; then he laughed, a hard laugh that came back in a harsh echo.

"It may be fine," he said; "I've never noticed. Rules and red-tape are not good appetizers, and at a place of that kind"—he nodded toward the Baywood Sanitarium—"they're the order of both day and night. A man who goes there deserves what he gets. I'm getting my share all right."

## CRICKET

"If you don't like it what 'd you come for? Didn't make you, did they?"

"I needed repairing." The man took off his glasses, wiped them, and put them back. "It was a case of get away or get on the junk pile."

Again the stranger was surveyed. "Junk ain't made of men like you." The boy's voice was decisive. "I didn't think you were a Rester. You don't look limp enough. Is it your lungs or your legs or what that's got the little bugs in 'em?"

In spite of himself the man smiled. "Lungs," he said. "So far they are not greatly damaged. I'm here to head off trouble, to let go, do nothing, and all the other nonsense. I'm merely to think of the thing most calculated to set me crazy—myself."

Leaning forward, the child tied the string of his well-worn shoe. "I had to stop thinking about myself when I wasn't but nine," he said. "I don't remember when my mother and father got drowned, but I was seven when my grandmother died, and eight when my aunt died, and I had to whistle so much to keep from letting anybody know how I felt inside that my mouth got to look like I lived on persimmons. You can't whistle and whine at the same time, can you? And when Mis'

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Lemmon took me I knew she wouldn't want a whiner, so whistling had to be my job. Hello! There's somebody going in Mis' Roberts's front yard."

Untwisting his feet from the lower rail, the boy got up, and, balancing himself on the top of the fence, shaded his eyes with his hands and looked toward a house some half a mile away.

"There're two carriages." His voice was excited. "And folks are getting out of both. One of the ladies has got a big white something in her hands. I bet it's a cake. Bettie Roberts is going to have a party to-night. That's why I've been sitting here so I could see for Teenie. Teenie's a Tuber. Leg one. She can't walk a step, and I have to see something to tell her every day, and some days there ain't a thing to see. Bettie Roberts is engaged to be married, and she's giving a party so everybody can know it." He craned his neck in eager anxiety to miss no detail of the far-away scene. "Mis' Lemmon says when she was a girl they didn't use to tell, but she don't blame Bettie for telling. She's thirty, and it's the onliest chance she's ever had. I'll have to go now. I reckon it's five, and Teenie will be waiting."

Jumping down from the top rail, the child stood a moment, hat in hand, in front of the



## CRICKET

man still sitting on the fence, and into the freckled, eager face the color crept slowly.

"I'm sorry you had to come if you didn't want to," he said. "Ever try whistling when—when if you were a girl you wouldn't, you'd—" On the end of his finger the torn hat was twirled swiftly. "When I used to feel that way I'd say, 'Cricket, you got that to be thankful for, anyway, you ain't a girl,' and then I'd go off in the woods by myself and let all the swear things inside come out. Damn easy to smile when you feel good, ain't it? and damn hard when you don't. Mis' Lemmon says I must have been born with the swearing disease. My father was a swearer. But a fellow's got to do something, ain't he, when he hasn't any blood kin and nobody cares much, and he wants to do the things he can't, and has to do a lot he despises? There's milking. I hate it worse 'n poison, and do it regular twice a day. Have to. That's why I took to whistling. Teenie didn't like my language, and something had to come out. Do much fishing where you come from?"

"Haven't seen a live fish in ten years." Out of his pocket the man took a cigar, looked at it and rolled it between the palms of his hands. "The one thing up here I care very

## THE HOUSE OF HAPPINESS

much to do is to smoke. I'm not allowed to smoke. I sympathize with your desire to swear, Cricket. I can do it myself on occasion, and of late the occasion has been continual. Where do you fish around here?"

"Lots of places. Brimming Creek is the best place, but I know all the places and all the paths, big ones and little ones. I'll show 'em to you when Mis' Lemmon don't need me after school, if there's ever a day she don't need me. Maybe Miss Taska won't mind if you go fishing with us some Saturday. I'll ask her. Good-by, mister."

With a nod the boy started down the hill, on his arm the round willow basket, on his shoulder the long reed which served for rod, and on the back of his head the torn and twisted hat. The blue jean overalls, hitched up to his shoulders, gleamed in the sunlight, and as he reached the road he turned and again waved his hand.

"Good-by!"

Through the cool, crisp air the echo came back clearly. "And say, mister, why don't you tell that doctor to go to hell—the one who's set you thinking just about yourself?"

## II

RIVES COLBURN

FOR some time after a turn in the road hid the boy from sight, the clear notes of his whistle came back to the man sitting on the fence; then, as silence slowly fell, he got down and began his walk back to the buildings on the hill some distance off. In the air was the sting of late October; in the sky splotches of pale pink and purple softened the glow of the sun, beginning to sink beyond the horizon, while on the hills and in the little valley, with its winding stream, the green and gold and red and brown of many trees made masses of color against the graying grass and shrubs and bits of earth overturned for winter's work. In front a blackbird flitted from tree to tree, head on the side, and noting cautiously the bark of a dog some distance off; but on the road, which wound in crescent fashion from one end of the little village to the other, there was no sign of life, and, putting his hands in his

## THE HOUSE OF HAPPINESS

pockets, the man walked on and kept his eyes on the ground. For some distance his head was unlifted, then as he approached a plot of land inclosed with an iron railing he looked up and after half a minute's hesitation stopped.

"Not many hamlets of three hundred people even in New England have two graveyards," he said, under his breath, and passing through the little gate went into the treeless inclosure and walked in and out among its mounds with their plain headstones; and presently he took from his pocket note-book and pencil and wrote down several of the quaint inscriptions.

For the one who

"Poorly lived and poorly died,  
Was poorly buried and nobody cried,"

he felt sympathy, but not in the same degree that he felt it for the woman whose

"Last words were:  
"I hope in Mansions of the Skies  
I'll never have to Economize."

On a somewhat imposing stone in the center of the little plot was an injunction to

"Remember, friend, as you pass by,  
That you some day must also die,  
And straight to Heaven or Hell must go,  
As gone I have, which well you know."

## RIVES COLBURN

In a far-off corner his foot caught in the tangled vines of a sunken mound whose broken stone was laid upon it, and as he caught himself the words upon the moulded marble held him by their familiarity, and the unmarked grave beside it told the ended story:

“She lived unknown and few could tell  
When Mary ceased to be.  
But now she’s dead, and oh—  
The difference to me!”

With a slight shiver as if cold he closed the little gate behind him and walked on, and half aloud repeated the names of Eldad Bagg and Eunice Foot, of Deborah Buck and Comfort Barnes, of Usube Hubbill and Mary Musick—names he had read in the rival graveyard of the Puritan forefathers. Adjoining this one was a tiny church, on the toy steeple of which a gilded cross gleamed in the fading sunlight, and he remembered being told by the man he had met in the road a couple of days ago that he was its rector and would be glad to see him at the service on the second and fourth Sundays in the month. The man had a keen, kind face, clean-shaven and of an ivory whiteness, and he had wondered for the moment why he was there. For his health, possibly. As dead as its grave-

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yards, Baywood could hardly be a place of residence from choice. Its climate was admirable, its scenery pastoral and peaceful, but climate and scenery, like bread alone, were not enough for man to live on, and it was unthinkable that a sane person could select so resourceless a place in which to spend his life unless compelled by unescapable necessity. He hated it, hated its stillness and serenity, its calm and content. Why had he come? If he had to put aside for the present all that made life endurable or justifiable, why had he not gone to a place nearer a city where he could occasionally feel the throb and stir and pulse of life? Why—He shrugged his shoulders. What was the use of going over it again? To whistle, perhaps, was wiser than to swear, but swearing would be his preference.

Half-way up the hill he stopped for breath. The ascent was slight and the path winding, but his heart was beating with uncomfortable rapidity, and with a frown he sat down on a rock. Leaning forward, he clasped his hands loosely, and with his foot tapped the ground with restless impatience. If he could only accept the thing properly! Hitherto when things got in his way he had gotten them out, but if for the present this particular thing could not be re-



## RIVES COLBURN

moved it might as well be accepted, and protest but added childishness to the situation in which he found himself.

For some minutes the stillness of the air was unbroken by even the chirp of a bird or the rustle of wind-stirred leaves, and presently he sat up, then leaned back against the rock behind the one on which he was sitting, and with narrowed eyes looked down upon the quiet little valley. Certain remembrances of the past came before him, faded slowly, and were followed by others, some vague and indefinite, others clear and distinct; and for some moments his present surroundings were forgotten in the thought of other things.

Of his parents' five children he alone had lived, and his earliest memory was of his mother's passionate care of him. From the time of his father's death, when he was but twelve, until his college days were over the practical side of life was about all he knew of it, but ever in his heart was the secret covenant made in his boyhood that he would some day be rich and give his mother that to which she was entitled. For himself he wanted little, but with something of passion he wanted money for his mother. Money meant position and power, and ease and luxury, and travel and books, and

## THE HOUSE OF HAPPINESS

beautiful clothes and generous giving; meant the absence of what for many years she had endured with fine and unembittered patience and with courage gay and sweet; and if by singleness of purpose and intelligent effort they could be won they should be won, he had said to himself a thousand, ten thousand times, perhaps.

He had been fortunate; he had made money, but it was not chance that had brought him a partnership in the largest banking and brokerage firm in his city. He had made ready for good-fortune when good-fortune was ready for him, and what some called luck had been won by work, by steady, ceaseless, tireless work.

Overhead a crow began to caw, and, getting up, Colburn fastened his coat shiveringly. Nearly six years had passed since his mother's death, but even yet dull pain had not entirely driven back its cruel shock, and there were still times when he had to keep himself busy both day and night to force away the memories of his early struggles to get for her what had come too late. After her death the house built for her, but never occupied, was sold, the things she had bought for it packed and stored, and he had taken rooms at his club.

Starting this time more slowly, he again began

## RIVES COLBURN

the walk to the top of the hill, and as he walked his thoughts again went back to other days. He deserved, perhaps, what had come to him. It had pleased him to forget that the body was a piece of machinery, and to work it as he had worked his was bad business, and of a sort that would not have been allowed in any other instrument subject to the depreciation of wear and tear. It was natural he should have forgotten. Before him had been opportunities which demanded immediate and continuous attention, and for some time past his work was all he had to give zest to life. He was not yet rich in the sense he intended to be, or had intended to be, and to be occupied was a necessity with a man of his temperament. At the office they called him Dynamo. Under his breath the word was repeated with ironic emphasis, and, stopping, he took out of his pocket a cigar and lighted it.

"Allowed or not allowed, I'm going to smoke," he said. "I'm as cold as an iced cucumber, and a drink is as far away as that little star over there. Had I been a drinking person I'd have left the day I got here."

Eyes on the little star, his walk was continued. Society in its silly sense he frankly hated, and yet he was engaged to a woman to

## THE HOUSE OF HAPPINESS

whom it was the breath of life. Frequently of late he had wondered how it happened he was engaged to her. Owing to his sudden attack of pneumonia, with its days of hovering between life and death, its weeks of discouraging convalescence, and the doctor's verdict concerning the condition of his lungs, the engagement had not been announced, and for the present would not be. He had told Isabel frankly all that the doctor had told him, and had offered to release her, but she had refused to be released. She was trying to do the right thing. She wrote regularly, but letters were a strain on Isabel, and so perfunctory had they become during his first absence from home that he was tempted to tell her before leaving for Baywood not to bother to write save when she really wanted to; but he had not told her. It was not an easy thing to tell.

A woman as beautiful as Isabel McLean should not be expected to be a clever writer; no one being got all the gifts, and he ought to be grateful to her for writing at all. In dress she was an artist; but art interested her about as much as welfare work, of which the papers were so constantly full. As the mistress of a handsome home she would find the part for which she was fitted, but— Well, he wanted a

## RIVES COLBURN

home, and Isabel was good to stand by him during the process of getting well. She was disappointed at the delayed marriage, but marriage was out of the question for some time yet. He should have been disappointed, also, but with his sickness had come a curious apathy to all things personal, and rebellion was chiefly that he must be laid aside and do nothing when he was most needed in the enlarging interests of the business, wherein new enterprises were being undertaken and new responsibilities assumed. The comedy of the thing was little less obvious than the tragedy. He had accomplished his purpose, and, like a grinning gargoyle, it was holding out its impotency to give meaning and sweetness to that strange and uncertain thing called life.

With a swift movement of his hand he threw his cigar away. He must have gotten hold of one that was given him. Taking out another, he started to light it, then put it back in his pocket and took out a note-book instead. Tomorrow at eleven o'clock was the monthly meeting in New York of the board of directors of the Mercantile Trust Company.

For some months he had been a member of the board, and he had intended some day to be its president. If he lived he would yet be its

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president. He drew in his breath sharply and, putting the book back in his pocket, passed between the stone columns forming the entrance to the sanitarium grounds, and on to his cottage some distance to the right.

### III

#### DINNER

AT dinner Colburn wondered which one she was. The room was gay and bright with lights and flowers, and few seats at the small and well-arranged tables were unoccupied, but none of the women suggested a possibility of being Cricket's fishing friend. Some of them were young, but the larger number had apparently passed the period in which fishing might appeal and reached the one wherein their determined occupation was the consideration of themselves; and indifferently he again counted them, and then counted the men.

Baywood was supposedly exclusive, undoubtedly costly, and admittedly the last word in the scientific treatment of incipient or threatened tuberculosis, and obviously its patrons were all of a kind. "Thirty-nine women and thirty-two men," he said, under his breath, and wondered why a certain division of humanity was like a certain class of hotels; and

## THE HOUSE OF HAPPINESS

why, when wealth came in, individuality so often went out. Also he wondered— He turned to the man on his right: “I beg your pardon; did you say salt?”

“I did. Said it three times. Are you hard of hearing, suh?”

Colburn again looked at the man. Two little eyes in a wizened little face were peering at him indignantly. “I really don’t know,” he said. “When I’m thinking of other things I may be, but—”

“You must think of other things a good deal of your time, suh.” The near-sighted eyes again peered at Colburn. “I have been confined to my room for the past two days, but I understand you have not made a remark since you were put at this table. Have you objections, suh, to sitting with us?”

The woman opposite, a middle-aged woman who bit her lips continuously, stirred uneasily; and, hardly knowing why, Colburn smiled at her. “So far I haven’t any objections.” He put the salt-cellar by the side of his questioner’s plate. “Some people are nicer than others to sit with, but we didn’t come here for enjoyment, I imagine. If I haven’t spoken to any one—”

“No one has spoken to you? That’s true.”



## DINNER

A short, stout fellow of barely twenty nodded across the table. "I've been on the darnedest dyspepsia jag this past week I've had since I came to this land of milk and water, and as I couldn't speak decently I stayed shut. One spoonful of Scotch—"

"Kitchen spoonful?" The interrupter's voice was satiric.

"Kitchen or coffee, it would have stopped the trouble if repeated often enough, and Dr. Browner smiled only and patted me on the back. I tell you I thought things—said them, too."

"With the door shut and the windows down." This time the voice was merely scornful. "We all say things, and when the Soft Voice comes along we drop on our knees and kiss the hand that keeps from us the reliever of life. We're a bunch—once men and women, now—"

"Subjects of science. My name's Harnish." The boy nodded at Colburn. "Got hurt in football, had typhoid, and T. B. the result. This is Mrs. Koler, and that is Miss Warriner next to you. The growler is Mr. Holman, and the gentleman who wanted the salt is Mr. McKenzie."

"Of South Carolina, suh." Mr. McKenzie extended his hand. "Camden County. They tell me it is because of trouble with my lungs

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that I am here. Mistake, suh! It's my brain, or I'd never stay. Your name, suh?"

"Colburn." The well-shaped, shriveled little hand was shaken. "Rives Colburn is my name."

"Changed your table, didn't they?" Young Harnish pushed his plate away. "You've only been here a short time, I believe?"

Colburn, who had taken off his glasses, wiped them and put them back. "No, I've been here a long time. By the calendar five days, but—I changed my table that some friends might be together." He pushed his coffee cup aside. "Is it true that people stay here for months?"

"Months!" Miss Warriner blushed at the emphasis of her ejaculation, and her helpless little hands came together with faint force. "I've been here a year, and yesterday Dr. Browner told me I'd have to stay another if I don't eat more. I can't eat any more. I try and try, and it won't go down. If I could just go home for a little while I think I'd—"

"My dear young lady, when flies and spiders get in the same net the flies are not apt to get out." Mr. McKenzie's little sandy goatee was separated into strings by Mr. McKenzie's restless fingers. "A place of this sort must be kept up. Are you an incipient or a threatened, suh?"

Colburn laughed. "Incipient according to

## DINNER

one authority, threatened according to another, and uncertain according to a third. I don't care to play the fly, but what is to be done when you're told it's get out and do nothing indefinitely or death may be the result?"

"Death is always the result." This time it was the few thin hairs on the back of Mr. McKenzie's head that suffered from his fingers. "I've been fencing with death for forty years, suh, and it is going to beat me yet. I was born too late to fight for my state, and eternity has nothing that will compensate for that, and I am going to die too soon. *The McKenzies and their Clan* will never be finished if I spend my time at places such as this. And where else can I spend it? Where can I go, and who would take me in? Hotels? No. Boarding-houses? No. Relatives? No. I have no near ones, and my friends are right in not wanting me around. I'm a danger, a nuisance. I have no home—"

"Why don't you have one?" Colburn's voice was curt.

"And live alone except for servants? Good God, man, have you ever tried it? I have; and if there are to be paid persons to look after me I prefer them at places of this sort, where they are taught how to do it. No, I'll go on sucking thermometers and being a dump for experts

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and specialists as long as there is anything with which to pay for the privilege of being experimented on. And when there isn't"—he crossed himself—"may the call come! After a while we get to be spineless, mere cravens whose first thought in the morning is temperature and whose last at night is fear of to-morrow. The young ones are different. They are hopeful and brave and ignorant. There's Taska—" He lifted his head and looked around the room. "Where is Taska?"

"She went down to the village this afternoon." Mrs. Koler looked behind her. "I wish she wouldn't stay out so late. It makes me so uneasy. She knows it's against the rules."

"Rules! Miss Laird's use for rules is to break them." Mr. Holman took an olive and examined it with half-closed eyes. "She has no business staying out as late as this. It isn't safe."

"Why not? What's going to hurt her?" Mr. McKenzie's voice was short and snappy. "She has a right to do what she chooses, and it's more than people have to criticize her. If—"

"We are not criticizing." Miss Warriner's fingers interlocked in nervous, anxious fashion. "But she oughtn't to worry us like this. I've

## DINNER

been so uneasy about her I couldn't eat a mouthful of dinner, except soup. There are some gipsies about here, and she'd like to know them—she told me so. I believe Dr. Randall went with her, but he came back an hour ago."

"Here's the doctor now." Harnish's hand went out and held the arm of the young man who was passing. "Hello, Doctor. Where's Miss Laird? Mr. Mac's getting ready to have a fit."

"What for?" The doctor's voice was a drawl with an upward inflection. "She'll be in presently. I left her in the village. Had to go over to Fernleigh to see Billy Barrett. He's had the fit."

"Was it true she made him get out of the runabout on top of Round Hill and walk all the way back to Fernleigh?" Miss Warriner's eyes were as eager in inquiry as her thin, high voice. "He is perfectly furious, I understand. It's two miles from Round Hill to Fernleigh, and he's not accustomed to walking."

"Pity it wasn't four miles!" Harnish's tone was vindictive. "He's a fat old muff! No more the matter with him than with my horse, except laziness. King Rester, Cricket calls him. Mama's pet thinks he has nerves, and she sent him here to—"

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"But how could she drive off and leave him! I don't see—"

"He'd tell you if he had the chance."

Dr. Randall put his hands in his pockets, and his words came with drawling deliberation: "I imagine he was telling her something she didn't want to hear, asking her something he had promised not to ask again. She dropped a hat-pin in the road, and when he got down to get it she picked up the reins and drove off. It was treatment he needed badly. I wish he could get it oftener. What's the matter, Miss War-riner? No dinner again to-night?"

"I wasn't hungry, and beef— I mean I'm a little afraid of heavy things at night. They keep me awake."

"Do nothing of the kind, madam. It's the empty stomach that keeps awake. I'll have to turn you over to Miss Laird," and with a nod he was gone and took his seat across the room.

"I forgot to ask him about the woman Taska went to see." Mrs. Koler sipped her coffee slowly. "If she's dying Taska will probably stay with her all night."

"No, she won't!" Mr. McKenzie knocked over a glass of water. In the hollow places under his high cheek-bones two spots of color

## DINNER

came suddenly, and, jumping up, he pushed back his chair. "I'm going after her. She sha'n't be subjected to such scenes as—as—I mean, of course, Taska shall do as she chooses, only—I swear she's enough to set a man crazy, and you are right, madam. She has no—"

A laugh, gay, warm, sweet, was heard behind him, and as Colburn turned he saw a girl put her hands on Mr. McKenzie's shoulders and push him back into his chair and for a moment hold him there.

"Dear Pepper Pot!" Her voice was joyous. "Is it me you're mad with? And I'm so hungry, so awful, awful hungry!"

"You can't have any dinner. It's been eaten up, and your grammar doesn't deserve any. Just feel her hands! Cold as ice! Get her some hot tea, Harnish. And you sit down—sit right down here!" And, again jumping up, the little man tried to push the girl in his chair.

"I can't." She brushed a strand of hair from her eyes. "I'm sorry I'm so late. But I'm not sorry I was out. It's magnificent out to-night. I could have walked miles."

"Is the woman dead?" Miss Warriner, who had been crumbling a piece of bread into pills of varying size, dusted her fingers. "Is she really dead this time?"



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"Of course she isn't dead! She had a sinking-spell and was frightened. It's her baby she's afraid of leaving. There is no one to take it."

"I suppose you told her you'd take it, and left her asleep." Mr. Holman took another olive.

"I told her she was going to get well and keep it herself—and I left her asleep. Is the dinner good to-night?"

"Please sit down and eat it at our table." Young Harnish, who, with the other men, was standing, pushed his plate farther back. "I'll tell Henry to bring clean things. Everybody is on the croak, and we need a dose of cheer. Oh, I forgot. This is Mr. Colburn, Miss Laird. Mr. Colburn has only been here a few days."

The girl held out her hand. "Cricket told me about you. The first week is awful, isn't it?" Her eyes laughed into his, but in them was understanding. "Cricket came to the top of the hill with me." The information was given to Mr. McKenzie. "I wasn't alone, so don't be fussy. I'm coming in the library after I see Jean." And with a nod she too walked off and to her seat at the opposite end of the room.

Mr. McKenzie took out his handkerchief and wiped the top of his bald and oblong head.



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"She is twenty-five years old, suh"—he turned to Colburn—"and some things you can't beat into her head. She will stay out after dark if she feels like it, and though she's the finest—"

Mr. Holman got up. "Sorry for you, Mr. Colburn. When Mr. McKenzie gets on the subject of Miss Laird he is liable to lose his head; otherwise he is all right."

"Which is more than you are." Mr. Holman was waved away as smoke is waved. "Miss Laird is from Virginia, suh. Tidewater section. You talk like a Virginian yourself, suh."

Colburn smiled slightly. "I ought to. I've spent my life in Virginia."

"Born there?"

Colburn nodded.

"Then you're different from most Virginians. I've met a number, and rarely one who didn't tell me, when introduced, who his father or grandfather or great-grandfather was. It's natural."

"Perhaps; but a bad habit, nevertheless." Colburn balanced his coffee spoon on the edge of his cup. "Why a man should attach any merit to himself on account of something for which he isn't responsible is beyond my par-

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ticular kind of understanding. Possibly because I come of a later day I believe a man should be recognized for his own qualifications, and not for his ancestors'. If he has the right ones he will be."

"And doubtless ought to be, but the one thing I pray Almighty God to deliver me from is new people. I don't like new people!" The palms of Mr. McKenzie's hands were pushed into the air. "They're as raw as new wine and as arrogant as they're raw. I prefer people with ancestors, with culture and charm and familiarity with the fine things of life, the things one is used to. A man may be made in one generation, but a lady never! You're a son of General Colburn, I suppose?"

"No, I am a son of a private soldier of the Army of Northern Virginia." Colburn smiled. "General Colburn was not a relative. His family was from the Piedmont section, and he a most admirable example of my belief. My family was from the Valley."

"My father and two brothers were with Jackson all through the Valley campaign, and later my father and one brother were with Lee. My oldest brother was killed at Second Manassas. My father was wounded at Bloody Angle, but my mother got him home before he died.

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I couldn't go, suh. I wasn't but twelve, and they wouldn't let me go. I stole a drum and ran away twice, but they brought me back. They wouldn't even let me beat a drum!"

Colburn got up. In the South-Carolinian's eyes was a gleam he had often seen before. He knew it well, knew it meant a refighting of battles, a retelling of old tales, tales of endurance and daring as brave and splendid as history has ever recorded, but he did not want to hear them again to-night. He glanced around the room. Surely something sharp, swift, decisive was preferable to the silent struggle going on about him, and the soldiers who fought amid the noise and roar of battle were fortunate compared to this regiment in which he found himself. The lights and laughter, the flowers and pretty gowns of the women seemed suddenly ghastly, and he pushed back his chair with a quick movement of his hands.

"Good night." He bowed to the table in general. "I'll see you in the morning, I suppose?"

"Hope so." Mr. McKenzie got up, and his squinty little eyes were turned to a table at the far end of the room. "I wonder how much longer that child is going to take to eat her dinner. She's the worst whist-player on the

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place. She will talk. She's a terrible player, but— Oh, well, there are some women you just want to have around! There are some, suh, but, by Heaven, there are many more you don't!"

## IV

### THE SYSTEM

A TAP next morning on his door waked Colburn from the nap into which he had fallen a half-hour earlier, and the tone of his "What is it?" was not polite.

The night had been a bad one. An indefinable restlessness had possessed him, and the demoralizing sensation which had occurred occasionally during the days of weakness following his attack of pneumonia, and which he could only liken to the sudden stopping of the beating of his heart, had upset him strangely, and not for hours could he get over its effect. The sense of cowardice which accompanied the sensation was so new and appalling that the principal emotions following it were indignation and irritation.

It was inconceivable that a man of thirty-three who had never before been ill, and to whom fear was as unknown as confidence was natural, should at times find himself without warning in

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a condition of puerile panic and nerveless weakness, and with the condition he had neither patience nor sympathy. With it was no feeling of faintness. Rather was the feeling one of acute consciousness, of the sudden surrender of fancied protection, of the unworth-whileness of human striving, and of contrasts in clear relief that before had been clouded; and had he been walking a tight-rope he could not for the moment have felt more helplessly insecure. It mattered not what the thing was called, the thing was to get rid of it. To be sick was a violation of common sense. It didn't pay. His failure to remember so simple a fact deserved, perhaps, the penalty exacted. He had walked too far the day before, overdone the thing; but though all this and more he had said to himself during the hours of sleeplessness, it had not taken away the depression that possessed him, and when roused by the tap on the door he was in a frame of mind that was neither spiritual nor polite.

As the door opened he turned his head. The masseur who was to rub him stood inside.

"Good morning." The man's voice indicated he had a cold. "Have you had your bath, sir?"

"No, I haven't." Colburn changed his po-

## THE SYSTEM

sition and closed his eyes. "Don't want a bath. Don't want anything. Go out, will you? I've got a headache."

"Sorry, sir, but my orders are for massage at this hour, and if I don't get it in now I won't to-day. Did you have a good night, sir?"

"Good night? Had beastly night. That's why I want to sleep. You needn't try to get in massage to-day. Go out, please!"

The man hesitated. He was a part of the system and worked mechanically. To leave undone a fraction of the day's appointed work was to interfere with the system. He came closer to the bed.

"I'm sorry, but I'm not allowed to do what the patients wish."

"Well, you'll do what this one wishes." Colburn half rose in bed. His head was throbbing, and he was limp from the long hours of wakefulness. He looked at the man, and the absurdity of being rubbed by such a little creature changed his tone.

"Go out, my son." He pointed to the door. "I'll see the king and answer for the crime committed. I am not going to be massaged. You understand English, don't you?"

"Yes sir, but—"

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"But nothing. I'm rarely patient long at a time. Are you going?"

The man went, and again Colburn tried to sleep. That little South-Carolinian might prefer a place of rules to a place of free will, he thought, drowsily, but he did not agree with the South-Carolinian. Regulations were undoubtedly necessary, but so was flexibility. A knock at the door made him start, its firmness was so emphatic.

"Well?"

The door was opened by a nurse, the nurse he had dodged since Baywood had been entered. Her eyes were yellow, her cheek-bones were large, her chin was small, and her expression one that created argument even though she said no word, and to himself Colburn thought things that were not well to think aloud.

"Are you sick this morning?" A thermometer was shaken in the air. "Reisen tells me you refused to be rubbed."

"I did." Colburn pulled the bedclothes up to his chin. "I am not sick, but I have a headache. I'll be much obliged if you will let me alone so I can get some sleep."

"You'll have to get permission from the doctor if you want to sleep. Your bath-hour is seven, hot milk half past, massage eight, and



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breakfast nine, and you've thrown everything out because you want to sleep. You must be outdoors by nine-thirty unless you have temperature."

Thermometer in his mouth, Colburn studied the face bent upon the watch held in one hand, while with the other his pulse was counted. It was a pity for a woman to be handicapped by a face of that kind. He wished it was on a china doll and belonged to him. If he had temperature it would be her fault.

The watch was closed and the tube taken from his mouth. "You'll have to get up," she said. "You have no temperature, and patients aren't allowed to stay in their rooms unless they're sick."

"Aren't they?" Colburn turned over on his side. "That's bad. I'll be obliged if you will close the door when you go out."

The nurse hesitated and looked around the room. "Do you wish me to ask permission for you to sleep?"

"I do not. You might ask the sun to stop shining. The glare is rather disagreeable; and don't forget, please, to close the door."

For half an hour the stillness was unbroken, and, eyes covered with his hand to keep them from the light, Colburn tried to sleep. The

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desire, he thought, was innocent enough, and the difficulty of achievement out of proportion to its innocence, but doubtless that, too, was a part of the system. In personal matters for some years he had paid no attention to system. In business it was essential, and perhaps he had carried it too far in business, but liberty of preference at times should be allowed all men, and if he wanted to sleep why should he have to get up? He wasn't going to get up.

Somebody was standing by the bed, a fat, good-natured little somebody, with red cheeks and big blue eyes, and in her hands was a large tray.

"I knocked, but you didn't say come in, so I came anyhow." She laid the tray on the table. "When breakfast is served in the room we are not allowed to bring it back uneaten. It's awfully cold this morning. Don't you want me to close the windows while you're having breakfast?"

Colburn opened his eyes, which at the sight of the tray he had closed. "I don't want any breakfast." He tried to keep impatience from his voice. She was only the instrument of the system and was not to blame any more than she was to blame for her round, rosy, unintelligent face with the eyes that would only see the out-

## THE SYSTEM

wardness of things. "I don't want any breakfast, and I wish you would close the windows and pull down the shades, please—pull them way down."

"Oh, but you're bound to eat your breakfast! It's been weighed and the record's been made, and I wouldn't dare bring it back!"

Her tone was a bit frightened, and again Colburn looked at her; then he sat up. "How are you going to make me eat it?"

"I don't know." She looked in the mirror opposite the bed and straightened her cap. "If you'd try you could. I'm sure you could. It's very nice. I'm responsible for your breakfast and—"

"Then why don't you eat it?"

"I can't. I've had mine, and it wouldn't be the same thing, and Miss Jarvis gets so cross if the patients don't eat. She thinks it's reflecting, and she says she can stand anything but reflections."

Colburn made a swift movement with his hand, and before the girl could stop him he had thrown grapefruit and quail and toast through the open window upon the well-kept lawn, and followed it with the pot of coffee.

"Put it on the bill," he said, "and tell Miss Jarvis to keep the broken pieces for reflec-

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tions. And close the door, please — close it tight."

This time he covered his head with the counterpane and under it he said ungodly things. He had come to Baywood for rest and quiet and scientific treatment, and he was getting treatment only, treatment with common sense left out. When the doctor had pronounced sentence and ordered him into the exile of such a place as this his first thought had been one of thanksgiving that his mother did not know. She was spared, and he was glad, but— He bit his teeth into his lips.

"Letters, sir!"

A head was thrust through the door and a couple of letters were thrown upon the bed. Colburn reached out his hand, looked at them and put them on the table by his side. Both were from the woman to whom he was engaged, but he did not read them. He could imagine pretty well what was in them. Isabel's letters were singularly alike. As examples of expression for people of less-restrained emotions and impulses it was a pity they couldn't be printed. Impulse and emotion were not characteristics of Isabel, and if possessed of them she kept them under the control of her judgment. Her judgment was admirable.

## THE SYSTEM

During his illness and through the weeks of weary convalescence she had sent flowers and notes with unfailing faithfulness, but she never came to see him. The engagement had not been announced, and conventionality forbade, and conventionality was the shrine before which Isabel knelt in worship and rendered the homage of acquiescence.

It was a pity, perhaps, that he had asked her to marry him, a pity that she had promised. He had not done it on impulse. It must have been done deliberately, for it had been a very calm occasion. When he was young, hundreds of years ago when he was young, he had imagined that when a man asked a woman to marry him it would be an awesome and wonderful and thrilling experience, preceded by alternate waves of abject doubt and delirious hope; and if she promised he would go away feeling as the knights of old must have felt, that upon him had been laid the insignia of a great order, the order of The Love of Man for Woman, and the ground upon which he trod would seem a holy thing.

He must have been a very silly boy. His old-fashioned romantic ideas he should have outgrown when he found they were out of date, but a good many of his ideas he did not seem to

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outgrow. He was thought a man of business only, and business perhaps had been his god—known or unknown, all people have their gods—but he was a good deal more than a man of business. Was he? He stirred restlessly. He must write to Isabel about the Colesworth house. She had wanted him to buy it before he went away. To own this house of marble and mirrors had been rather beyond his ambitions, and his ambitions were not modest; but it was not beyond Isabel's. It was for sale, and as its possessor he would own the handsomest house in his city, but it was not the kind of house he would select were the choice left with him. Still, if Isabel wanted it— He had given Ralstone power of attorney, and if the owner of the house would accept his offer he would write Ralstone to close the deal.

He pushed the counterpane from his face and with his hand shielded his eyes from the light. If something could be pressed on them the throbbing might cease. The sun must be going under a cloud, the room was getting so dark. It was very still; very, very still. Something *was* pressing on his eyes, something cool and firm which was making the pain grow less and less. It was strange; he had heard no one come in.

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What on earth could she be doing in here! Though his eyes were closed by the pressure of her fingers, he could see her very clearly. She had on the same dress she wore the night before, the simple dark-blue dress with the lace collar open at the throat; but brilliant color was no longer in her face, rather was it pale, and the black hair, parted and rolled back, made it paler by contrast. Bending slightly forward, her head uplifted as if listening, one hand was on his eyes, the other outstretched as if to keep back that which might disturb, and he knew she understood why he did not thank her for coming. If she would only stay, the pain would go away; there was very little now. Surely she would not go away!

“My dear man!” The voice was soft and unctuous. “In bed on such a day as this? Nothing serious, I hope? Not careful enough! Always the trouble at first, not careful enough!”

Slowly Colburn’s eyes opened, and he looked in the doctor’s face as one waked suddenly looks with wonder as to where he is, then he closed them sharply.

“What can I do for you, Mr. Colburn?” The big blond head of the doctor was bent solicitously over the bed, and the palm of one



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hand was pressed lightly on the palm of the other. "The nurse tells me you insist upon sleeping, which indicates listlessness and inertia. You must let me do something for you, something to help you."

"I wish you would." Colburn sat up and shook his pillow. "There is a boy about here somewhere named Cricket. Send him to me, will you? I'd like to employ him for an hour or so. He uses language that at times I like very much to hear."



## V

### A NIGHT VISIT

“**T** IRED to-night, little book, but only you need know it! Everybody is tired to-night; and, not having you to tell it to, they’re telling it to one another, so I slipped away. One gets so tired of tiredness and of all the old, old ‘Whys.’ I’m always asking why—and why don’t I leave to others the cracking of those riddles called the ‘Universe and Life’?”

At a sound in the hall Taska Laird’s head was held alert, then she got up from the table at which she had been writing and, going to the door, locked it. The hour was rather late for interruptions, still it was well to protect herself from possible chats with the other occupants of her cottage as they came from library or card or music rooms, and as an extra precaution she turned off all lights save the one in the lamp on the table. Her bed was on the veranda, and ready for her were the warm clothes in which

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she slept, but she was not sleepy, and, moreover, she must write.

Coming back to the little book in which she had been writing, she looked at the first date in it, then, sitting down, leaned back in her chair and glanced over the closely written pages. How did people manage to live who didn't let out to somebody or something all the queer, surging, questioning things that were in them, and which, though no one could answer, must, nevertheless, be asked? How did they live without something or somebody to tell things to? She didn't have the somebody, but she had the something. Besides, people told things, and so few understood.

Certainly few understood her. One's inmost self was not supposed to be understood, but one's outward self had some claim to understanding; yet here, as elsewhere, they thought her one thing, and she was so oftentimes most verily another. Well, why not? If they believed her light of heart and free of care, why not again? It was little enough to seem undaunted, to keep a smiling face and a stout heart. She picked up her pen and again began to write rapidly.

"But I haven't a stout heart, little book. Sometimes I am so tired and afraid, and to laugh

## A NIGHT VISIT

when I long terribly to cry—yes, cry—I don't do it, but I'd like to—isn't half as easy as it seems to others. What a bumpy old highway it is we're on! Some are too busy to stop and question, to puzzle and bother, and wonder what the pack on the other man's back is, and some don't care. It is only their pack of which they think, but everywhere, everywhere are people and packs, and a lift is the least we each can give. There were so many things I wanted to do, so many things I wanted to be! Thousands more like me! Homes, and houses which aren't homes, and hospitals, and Sans are full of them. I wish I could send them a message—send them my love and tell them I understand down to the bottom and up to the top. Hello, people! It's no use pretending we haven't a pack, but a big, big use in keeping it where it belongs.

“A new pack-man came last week. He is a fellow-Virginian; by nature combative rather than philosophic, I imagine, and *his* pack has filled him with a good large lot of fury. He isn't afraid, and he isn't depressed. He's plain mad. I'm sorry for him, sorry for anybody who has his sort of fight ahead, but I can't help seeing the comical side of it. He isn't imperious, has very quiet, almost gentle manners, but he

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has evidently been accustomed to saying to one man go, and he goeth, and to another come, and he cometh; and he is going to hit his head a good many times before he will admit the thing hit is there to stay, and he'd better be more considerate of his head.

"He has a very steady way of looking at you. Though he only saw your face, he'd know of a surety if there happened to be a hole in your stocking. Doubtless he knows a good deal about the Paleozoic Age, and Ceramics and Currency and Finance and German Philosophy, but he doesn't know life as well as Cricket knows it. To meet a man of his sort is good for you. It makes you realize it's the way we take life that makes life. He takes it hard. Also he is the sort of man Cricket needs. Most of the men up here Cricket thinks are jokes."

A knock at the door made her turn quickly. Pen in hand, she listened and then glanced at the clock. It was after ten; she must have been mistaken in thinking she heard some one.

"Miss Laird?" The voice was low and shivering. "Miss Laird, are you up?"

Opening the door, Taska looked at the nurse standing in the hall, arms hugged to her breast. "Who is it?" She stopped. "You look frozen

## A NIGHT VISIT

to death, Miss Babbitt. What's the matter? Come in."

The nurse came inside. She laughed. "I am frozen. It's horribly cold, and I didn't stop to get a coat. I didn't want to come; it isn't fair the way you're sent for, but she made me; said she must see you. For two hours she has been on the verge of hysterics and—"

"Who has? Who are you talking about?"

"Mrs. Woods. I thought you knew. Yesterday she spit a bit of blood. It doesn't mean anything—came from her nose probably—but it terrified her to death. She had been getting on nicely and really getting well, but since yesterday she's been afraid to move, and to-night she's all to pieces. It's all nonsense—"

"No, it isn't nonsense." Taking off her slippers, Taska put on her shoes and a big warm coat. "While it's got you, fear is the most real, the most genuine thing on earth. Those who don't suffer from it think it is silly, until their time comes. It always comes."

"Never seems to come to you. Nine times out of ten it's lack of self-control. I don't believe in pampering it."

"Dear healthy animal—your time hasn't come." Taska laughed and closed the door behind her. "Fear has a thousand forms, and

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though it may belong to the collateral class of diseases, with some people it's a major trouble. Panic is not peculiar to weakness and women. Strong men and horses are possessed at times. I wish you'd come earlier. I was just going to bed."

Hurrying down the steps and across the lawn to a cottage at the left of the main building, the two women walked swiftly. The night was clear and the sky thickly studded with stars, but there was no moon, and the stinging air was as silent as if frozen. Most of the cottages were dark. On several of the verandas their occupants were asleep on the beds which at night were rolled out of their rooms, and as one was passed Miss Babbitt touched Taska's arm meaningly.

"There's the cause of half the trouble." Her voice was lowered to a careful undertone. "I believe he reads all night long. If he'd go away she might get well."

Taska looked behind, but made no comment, and as Mrs. Woods's door was reached she turned to the nurse. "Let me go in alone," she said. "You take a nap and come back in half an hour."

The nurse hesitated. "You shouldn't stay that long. She nearly wears me out."

## A NIGHT VISIT

"She won't wear me out." Taska smiled and went in, and as she closed the door Mrs. Woods, in a low chair and wrapped in a pink satin quilt, held out her hands eagerly, then burst into tears. "Oh, Taska, Taska!"

Taking off her coat and drawing a chair closer to the sobbing woman, Taska waited for the first paroxysm to pass. She had seen tears of this sort many times before. "Well," she said, presently, "well, aren't you going to tell me about it. That's what I came for. Let's take it out and look at it and see if it is really as big as you think."

With her ring-laden fingers Mrs. Woods pressed her handkerchief to her eyes, then wiped her cheeks and lips. "Take out what?" she said. "Oh, I'm wretched and miserable, and I'm going to die! I know I'm going to die!" And again the tears began to fall.

"You certainly are." Taska's voice was cheerfully emphatic. "So am I. So is everybody we know. But you needn't make final arrangements just yet. Dr. Browner says T. B. isn't going to kill you. It will have to be something else."

"But yesterday I spit blood!" The voice was thin and frightened. "Spit it twice!"

"That's nothing. I've spit it a dozen times



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from my nose, just as you did. Did you think it was from your lungs?"

"I know it was, and I'm so wretched and miserable! I want to live—and be happy! I want—"

For a moment Taska looked at the cowering woman, her face covered by her hands, and pity and impatience struggled with irritation and sympathy; then she glanced around the room. In it were all the luxuries allowed by hygienic restriction. On the bed was the lace-frilled pink silk room-gown, which had been replaced by a warmer one of wool, and under it were the slippers to match. On bureau and tables were the costly paraphernalia of toilet accessories, and between the windows a jar of American beauties. From the tear-soaked handkerchief came the faint fragrance of violets, and suddenly Taska leaned forward.

"Did you ever have a tooth taken out, Mrs. Woods?"

"A tooth?" The hands came from the face, and two undoubtedly pretty eyes looked into Taska's. "Not since I was a child. Why?"

"I wondered if you remembered how it hurt, and yet how necessary it was to get it out. Listen!" She took the two slender hands in hers, and gradually their trembling grew less



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and less. "You have got something very deadly the matter with you."

"Oh, don't!" The voice was a cry of terror. "Don't!"

"Yes, you have. It is self-disease. A great many people have it. Some call it egoitis, some damn-foolitis, and some don't call it at all, but it causes more disaster than all other illnesses put in a bunch. It warps and twists and ruins the person's soul and mind and heart, but it doesn't put the body in the grave. You've got it. You think you've got T. B. badly, think you've got a lot of things you haven't, but the tooth that's giving the trouble you won't let come out. Dr. Browner says physically you're in very good shape, and in a month or two you can go home."

"I don't want to go home!" A slippered foot was swung petulantly. "He doesn't know how I feel. I'm afraid of everything, afraid—"

"All of us are afraid sometimes." Taska's voice was quiet, and her hands held firmly those of the many rings. "Do you think you are the only one who wants to live—and is afraid? You've lost confidence in everything but your own emotions and sensations."

"I didn't send for you to lecture me!" This

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time the voice was petulant. "I don't want to know about—"

"There are a great many things you don't want to know but are going to know. If you could lose your money and had to take in washing and make your children's clothes and cook for your husband a year or so, you'd get well. Your first and last thought wouldn't then be yourself." She laughed. "If you didn't want plain truth, why did you send for me? You always get it." Suddenly she straightened. "Why don't you pull yourself together, Mrs. Woods? You know perfectly well what's the matter. You've been playing with fire, and it has burned."

Over the face before her spread gray ashiness, and for a moment Taska was frightened; then she spoke again. "You think you are miserable because you've spit a bit of blood. It isn't that. Why did you send for me, Mrs. Woods?"

For a moment there was silence, then again the tear-stained face was buried in the soft and nerveless hands. "I sent for you because I must talk to somebody. I shall choke and smother if I keep it to myself, and you—you always understand even if you do say dreadful brutal things. I don't know why I should be afraid of death. I've little enough to live for.

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There's only one thing worth living for, and I've never had that. People think I have—think because I have everything money can buy I ought to be happy!" She sat upright, and her fingers twisted and untwisted in nervous, unconscious movements. "I do have everything money can buy, but it can't buy the thing I want. I want happiness. Why shouldn't I have it? To please my parents I married a rich man who was going to be richer. They knew I didn't love him."

"Yet, he is the father of your children." Taska shivered slightly, and her hands stiffened. "Go on."

"Yes, he is the father of my children, and for their sake I've pretended to be happy. I crowded the days and nights to keep from thinking, went everywhere, gave endless parties, and drifted further and further. We had nothing in common. He hates traveling, cares nothing for sports of any kind, reads nothing, does nothing but make money."

"That's what you married him for, wasn't it—his ability to make money? Doesn't he care for the children?"

"Yes." The voice hesitated, and the lace on the handkerchief was pulled into points. "He cares for the children, but they are rarely at

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home. For the last few years I've been sick so much, in a hospital or traveling, that it was best for them to be with his mother in the country. Rutledge is nine and Sarah is six, and I hardly know them. Yet it's for them I've played a part. I had made my bargain and expected to stick to it, but I did not know I should ever know what—"

"Go on."

"Oh, it's no use using that tone. I could have used it, too, before I knew what—love is."

"Do you know now?"

"Yes, I do." Mrs. Woods sat still further upright. Fear and weakness yielded to self-will and desire. "When one doesn't know one cannot understand, but when one does—Well, I know. I have been starved and famished for comradeship, for understanding, for happiness, for what one has the right to ask of life. Before I knew I thought I had accepted negativeness. We all think that until we see what we have been waiting for, not knowing that we waited."

"But why did you send for me to tell this to?" Taska leaned forward. In her voice was neither impatience nor pity. "You are most right. I know nothing of that of which you seem to know so much. I might understand at

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a telling many things of which I was before ignorant, but eternity wouldn't be long enough to make me understand how a woman could forget her children."

"I'm not forgetting my children! But do you think a woman should continue to live with a man she doesn't love?"

"Not fifteen seconds. Neither do I think she should marry a man she doesn't love."

The face opposite flushed. "Oh, we all think that and continue to do it. When nothing happens to make us realize its unendurableness we keep on, but when it does we lose some of our correctness and some of our cynicism. I may not have long to live, but in the while I have I want happiness—and I mean to get it."

"How?"

Elbow on the table and chin in the palm of her hand, Taska's clear eyes held those, now defiant, that for a moment were raised to hers. "How?" she repeated.

"Why do you look at me like that?" Mrs. Woods stirred uneasily. "I am only going to do what thousands of others have done. I am going to get a divorce. There's hardly a family in America that hasn't some member in it divorced, or that ought to be, or would like to be."

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“And after the divorce?”

Again the pretty face colored. “I don’t understand you, Taska. I sent for you because I knew you had big views of things, saw them in the large, and apart from the petty way most people see them. When that Mrs. Dreed, who was here when you first came, ran away with her doctor you were the only one who had any sympathy for her, the only one who didn’t condemn and abuse and criticize, the only one who seemed to understand.”

“I did understand.” Slipping from her chair to the stool at Mrs. Woods’s feet, Taska sat on it, and took in her firm ones the frail little hands whose fingers were still picking at the lace on the handkerchief which they held. “I did understand—all of its uselessness and pitifulness and selfishness and stupidity, and I was so sorry for her. It was going to last such a little while, the happiness to which they thought they had a right. No one can explain, but certain things never grow in but one sort of soil, and happiness is one of them.”

“You seem to know a good deal about happiness and how it grows. One would think you’d lived a dozen lives.”

“Perhaps I have.” Taska smiled. “Certainly I’ve been watching people for a long

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time, wondering about them and what it is that makes and unmakes happiness. You think you've found out what it is to love. Are you sure—are you very sure it's love that you have found?"

"Of course I'm sure. I tell you I know."

For a moment there was silence, then Taska again looked up. "When I came in I asked you what it was. What we see is that you are tired of your husband, want to divorce him and marry—Mr. Ambleton."

Mrs. Woods started, and her hands fell in her lap. "Oh, don't! don't! We mustn't call names. I knew I could trust you, but—"

"We must call names, and call things by their right names. I was merely stating the situation. You, a married woman, have allowed yourself, or not allowed—it does not matter—to fall in love with a man who has made you believe he is in love with you. He isn't in love with you. He is incapable of loving deeply but one person on earth, and that is himself. He is trying to persuade you to get a divorce and marry him. On what grounds? Incompatibility? It is a coward's plea, a whiner's, and generally a false one. If a man and a woman cannot live together with respect, with dignity, with affection, even if there be



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not deep love, they are right to live apart, but you would have continued to keep your husband's name, to live in his home, to spend his money if you had not met this man who has fascinated you, made you believe you have found out what it is to love. If you get a divorce"—Taska got up—"for the love of Heaven get it honestly. Get it because you want to be the wife of another man, and don't call things by the wrong name."

Mrs. Woods began again to cry. "You have no right to talk to me like this. I am years older than you. I thought you would understand and sympathize."

"No, I don't understand. With many kinds of sins I am sympathetic. It's hard not to sin; but with some kinds I haven't got a mite of sympathy. And we're tired, the world is tired of this song of the right to lead our own lives—our lives aren't just our own. Of the right to get happiness in our own way. There is no way of getting happiness at the hurt of others. If you marry your man, a year later come and tell me of your happiness!"

"Don't you believe divorced people who remarry are happy?"

"Perhaps they are. But the causes and conditions of divorce and remarriage are very



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different. It's no use discussing it. If I could help you I would. You don't want help. You want your way."

"I suppose you think I'd be committing a sin and will be punished for the sin." Mrs. Woods's voice was thinly satiric. "I've passed that point of view."

"I don't know that I ever reached it." Taska put on her coat. "Mine is that of the somebody who said we are not punished for our sins, but by them. Here's Miss Babbitt." She turned to the nurse, who was at the door. "I don't think your patient is very sick. She just thought she was. Good night, Mrs. Woods. Oh, is this the new picture of your little girl?"

She took up a photograph in a silver frame which was on the dressing-table and for a moment looked at it closely. "What beautiful, wonderful eyes she has!" Coming close to the reclining-chair, she put the picture in the hands that again were trembling and laid her own upon them.

"Good night. May she bring you good dreams. She will soon be going to her, Miss Babbitt. The very thought of her should make her well and—strong."

## VI

### A FISHING PARTY

“YOU'RE not as friendly as I thought, Cricket. Didn't you tell him he could go with us some Saturday?”

“I told him I'd ask you if he could go with us.” Cricket twisted his new cap into a round woolen ball and looked away from the eyes that were looking into his.

“I said I'd ask you, but I didn't mean I was going to ask you the first time you got that book you promised to read to me. I'm going to ask you next Saturday.”

“No, you're not.” Taska Laird took up her fishing-rod and ran her hand down its length. “You're going to ask him this Saturday. How many Saturdays has he been here?”

“Three, I think. Maybe it's four. Lemme see.” The fingers of Cricket's left hand were separated to their fullest extent. “The first one Mis' Lemmon wouldn't let me go, and the second one you couldn't, and the third one it

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rained, and this is the fourth. Don't seem like it's been four weeks since Bettie Roberts had her party, but that's when I told him I'd ask you. He was a downer that day; didn't say much, but—"

"If he feels as he looks he won't be gay company to-day. Run over there and tell him we're going to Falling Creek this morning and—"

"Sure you've got lunch enough?" Cricket stuck his cap on the back of his head and, taking from his pocket a piece of twisted twine, began slowly to unravel it. "It's as cold as blazes this morning and just thinking about fishing makes you hungrier 'n a hound, and you promised you'd read three chapters if I'd use polite language for a week. I haven't said a word what ain't righteous for seven days, and you can't read if that new cuss comes along."

"New what?"

"Cuss ain't cussing." Cricket shifted his position and glanced across to the veranda steps some distance off on which a man was sitting. "'Tain't that I don't like him. I like him a lot. We go walking two or three times a week, and he's a ripping talker when he feels like being, and when he don't he just chews his cigar and lets me talk. But I don't want

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anybody to-day 'cept you and me and the book, Miss Taska. Please, 'm, don't make me ask him to-day."

With eyes watching their every movement the man of whom they were talking lifted his hat as Taska looked in his direction; and then, as if conscious that his gaze had been more steady than necessary, he opened the magazine on the step beside him and began, seemingly, to read. He was in no mood for reading. The day was splendidly clear and cold, and the blueness of the sky and brilliance of the sun, together with a subtle something, called stirringly for a long walk, for surrender to the appeal of woods and hills; and with boyish longing he wished they would ask him to go with them, wherever their going might be.

There had been several walks with Miss Laird during the past weeks, and the days on which they had been taken were the days that were mentally marked as strangely apart from the dullness of the ordinary routine. But, though he saw her every day, there was rarely opportunity for more than superficial chatter; always, always there was some one else around. She was a good talker, and she had ideas of her own—ideas that when occasion demanded she would not keep to herself. His eyes again

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upon her, he wondered what the present conversation was about.

"I'd like just you and me and the book, too, Cricket," she was saying; and, hands in the pockets of her sweater, she nodded to the boy. "But I don't believe either of us would like being left alone on a day of this kind. It's such a magnificent day, Cricket. Which do you think you'd rather do, stay here alone or go fishing with me and—and Mr. Colburn, say?"

"Rather go fishing with you."

"Then run over and tell him what I said just now while I get the lunch. If he wants to go he must be ready in fifteen minutes."

Hands in his pockets, Cricket stood before his new acquaintance and dug little holes in the ground with the heel of first his left shoe and then his right. The honest, frank eyes were troubled. Subterfuge and evasion were not of his understanding, and, though ashamed of his unwillingness to extend the invitation he had offered on his first meeting, he was firmly opposed to any interruption to the opening chapters of *Huckleberry Finn*, and his greeting was not as cordial as it might have been.

"Miss Taska says would you like to go fishing this morning?"

Colburn, hands clasped loosely between his

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knees, looked at the boy in front of him and smiled slightly. "Good morning."

"Good morning." With a swift movement of his hand Cricket's cap came off. "Awful cold morning to go fishing, ain't it? Folks what ain't used to it—"

"Might not have good luck?" Again Colburn smiled. "Tell Miss Laird I will go with pleasure. She is very good to ask me."

Twirling his cap, the boy turned, hesitated, and came back. "You won't mind if she reads a little while to me after we eat lunch, will you? I'll make a big fire, and you can go to sleep if you want to, and if you don't—"

"I may listen?" Colburn got up. "I think I'd like very much to listen. What's the book?"

"*Huckleberry Finn*." Cricket drew in a deep breath. "She read me *Tom Sawyer* twice. Somebody always had *Huck* out the library, and she couldn't get it until to-day. Ever read it?"

"Dozen times."

"Bully, ain't it!" At the thought of coming joy arms were swung in the air, and with shining face Cricket gazed at the man in front of him.

"Got one of your own?"

Colburn nodded. "Got two, I think. Have

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everything the man who wrote it ever wrote. What time shall I be ready?"

"Soon as lunch is." Squinting his eyes to keep out the dazzling sunlight, Cricket again surveyed the man on the steps.

"Reckon you'd better put on fishing-clothes if you have any feeling for them you're wearing. 'Tain't any fun if you have to be particular. I'll lend you my rod and things." He stopped. "Don't tell her I told you, but if you want to go again you'd better look like you was enjoying yourself. Miss Taska ain't got any love for grumps. And don't keep her waiting. She's an awful prompt person."

Half an hour later, basket on one arm, book under the other, and rod on his shoulder, Cricket, whistling his way through the deep, fragrant woods, turned occasionally to see if his companions were having difficulty in following his private path to Falling Creek, some three-quarters of a mile away. Very narrow was the short cut he was making, and in the thick carpet of pine-needles and fallen leaves of oak and fir the footsteps of the walkers were lost, and only the sound of their voices or the rustle of low-hanging branches as they swung back after being held aside by Colburn for Taska to pass under reached the boy from time to time.



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Presently he stopped whistling and, squinting his eye at a bird high up in a tree, nodded soberly toward it.

"Knowed 'twas going to be that away. Two is a company and three ain't, and 'tain't ever going to be. That's the way that man did who came from Buffalo to see her. He was a damn pig, that man was—I mean he was a pig."

Clear laughter from the girl behind him clouded his face, and slowly he took a piece of string, hidden under his shirt, from around his neck and, putting down book and basket and rod, tied a knot in it.

"First one for a week," he said aloud. "Might have been six if I'd thought about that fellow before to-day. Don't seem like it ought to be a sin to call a thing by its right name, and there is a difference in pigs. It's a page out of *Huck*, though. Got to tell her, and every word that comes out what oughtn't is a page less, she says."

Putting the string around his neck on the outside that he might remember, he waved his hand without looking around and again trudged on, whistling as cheerfully as if the little interruption had not occurred; and, watching him, the man and the girl laughed.

"I couldn't have stood the first two weeks



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if it hadn't been for Cricket." Hands in her sweater pockets, Taska Laird, walking with the easy swing of one used to country roads, looked at the boy ahead with frankly loving eyes. "It was so sudden, so amazing and unbelievable—that I was a Tuber, I mean"—she laughed and nodded in Cricket's direction—"that I was a bit blind at first, and bewildered and dazed and indignant and—so sorry for myself! The last condition might have been acute if Cricket had not saved me."

"Or you saved Cricket. From what he tells me the debt is on his side."

"Oh, that's Cricket! The gladness he reflects he thinks is given, and much that he imagines in others is merely his own radiation. He made me see things I didn't want to see, perhaps. I don't like little things or quiet places. I like people and big things. I've always wanted to deal with big thoughts, big issues, big ideas, big situations. There's so much to do. Life is so fine a chance"—she reached up and pulled a branch of red leaves from the tree she was passing—"and I can do nothing but wait and see if there is even to be life at all."

Colburn looked ahead, and for a moment no sound broke the silence save the rustle of

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the leaves under their feet, then she turned to him. "Forget that," she said. "I don't know why I said it."

"Why shouldn't you say it?" His voice was quiet, but in it was no longer bitterness. "It is nonsense to think life means the same to all people, or that there are not infinite differences of valuation. To many it is merely a physical experience, to preserve which is its supreme purpose, but to others it is much more than a matter of time. To sleep and wake not might be cause of neither sorrow nor regret, but to be put aside, to watch rather than to work, to wait instead of will, to see others take our places, to give nothing to life and get nothing out of it, is asking a good bit of human nature. To meet the demand smilingly is beyond human ability."

"Perhaps, and perhaps not." One by one the red leaves were slowly pulled off and thrown upon the ground; then her head went up, and she smiled a gay, wistful little smile. "Demands must be met or evaded, and evasions wear out. But suppose we had died when we first found there had to be some sort of a fight, would it have made any great difference after the first few weeks? Death is dreadfully personal, terribly important to oneself, and so unimportant to the rest of the world. Oh, I don't

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mean"—she put out her hand as if to prevent his interruption—"that to some few our going may not matter very much, but to life— How many of us live lives that count?" She stopped. "What in the world am I talking about on a day like this! Aren't the pines magnificent? Tell me of your cousin, Miss Joyner. Is she still abroad? I met her at Trouville. She was very lovely."

Colburn turned toward her. "Why should we talk of a pretty person when we can talk of real things, even if they are not pretty?" He made an impatient movement with his hand. "I've little understanding of or sympathy with this modern theory that we must smirk and smile through life and shut our eyes to pain and ugliness. I don't believe in it. If there's ugliness, look at it and get rid of it if possible, but don't pretend it isn't there. There aren't many people one can talk with intelligently, and if you and I feel—" He hesitated, and in his face color crept slowly. "What's the use of dodging, Miss Laird? We're up against something that's pretty cruel, something we hate."

"And in all human history hate has never helped. We've got to cut it out."

"And learn to love it—the condition in which we find ourselves?" His voice was ironic.

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“To love it?” She shook her head. “Hardly. To use it, perhaps.” She waved her hand to the boy ahead. “There’s the creek, and Cricket is beckoning us to hurry. I don’t believe you know anything at all about fishing, or you’d be more excited. Look at Cricket! He’s exuberance in the flesh. You—you’re much too old, Mr. Colburn—”

Again waving her hand, with a laugh she left him and hurried ahead to where Cricket was waiting and, emptying her pockets of certain possessions, began to make ready for the morning’s sport. Overhead the sun dazzled, and on the water, lazily making its way to the lake half a mile distant, it gleamed and sparkled in a path that followed the banks, thick with shrubs and trees and rocks of varying size; and as he watched her Colburn wondered if she knew how perfectly she was a part of the setting, and thought of ill health seemed suddenly absurd.

Her movements were swift and graceful, and in her short cloth skirt and buttoned boots, her white sweater and soft hat, under which her black hair shone in the sunlight, she was so strong a contrast to the woman she had been the night before that the change puzzled him. He had gone in for a few moments to some sort

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of a party given by one of the guests to certain of the other guests, and so easily had she dominated it by a certain vividness and compelling radiance that the other women had been faded and colorless beside her, and there had been swift thought that surely she was born to reign. To-day she was but Cricket's comrade, a girl only, glad and joyous and frankly happy at the prospect ahead.

Out of the tin can bait was taken and hooks made ready, and in a sheltered place, close to some good-sized rocks, the book and lunch basket were carefully stored. Bits of wood and broken branches of trees were next gathered for the fire to be made when lunch-time should arrive and the fish caught be consumed by appetites active and unashamed; and then Cricket, who had been busy, turned to the man who had been watching.

"Want to go with me to the spring?"

Colburn nodded. "Anything I can take along?"

"Nothing to take, but something to bring. If I show you what 'tis you won't tell, will you?"

The promise made, Cricket turned to the right and up the slight incline and beckoned mysteriously. "This way," he said, and looked cau-

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tiously in front and behind. "We had to hide the things on account of thieves. There are a lot of thieves in this world who don't know they're thieves. Those Simmons boys go to Sunday-school regular as Sunday is Sunday, and they're damn rascals, that's what they are. They stole our first water-bucket and saucepan, so we had to hide the new ones. Miss Taska bought the things from the store, and somebody is going to get licked if they're ever gone again. I ain't going to ask who took 'em, but the Simmons boys will get the licking." He stopped and turned to the man following behind in the tiny path too narrow for both to walk abreast. "Didn't I say 'damn' just now?"

Colburn stopped also. "I think you did. I wasn't noticing very carefully, but—"

"I said it." Slowly the piece of string around the boy's neck was taken off and slowly another knot was tied in it. "That makes twice this morning, and it's two pages now instead of one."

For a moment there was silence, and in the boy's head bent over the string there was hint of dejection, but in a moment it was raised and the frank eyes looked into Colburn's.

"If I keep on like this there won't be much

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of *Huck Finn* to-day, will there?" he asked, and the string was put in place. "Page a word is what they cost me, and they're out before I know they're coming. Ever have any trouble that way?"

"What way?"

"Using language what ain't Christian?"

"There have been times." Colburn's voice was slightly evasive.

"Most all the time with me." Cricket's voice was unembarrassed. "You see, it's this way." Stooping, he picked up a pebble and, swinging back his arm, threw it at the topmost branch of a tall pine tree. "I'm talking about things and people, and I call 'em names without remembering I oughtn't, and because there is a difference in pigs and people—ain't it?—and then when it's out I can't get it back. Miss Taska and Teenie don't like it, and I don't reckon my mother would, either, and if I knew I was going to do it I wouldn't—that is, sometimes I wouldn't, but sometimes I would. Kinder lets out something inside to call things by the right name. Here's the place."

Kicking away a tree-trunk, Cricket pushed back the brush on top of a box sunk in the ground and, dropping on his knees, took off the top and one by one handed the tin utensils



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therein to Colburn; then, getting up, covered the hole carefully.

“The spring ain’t far from here”—again he looked around—“but neither is the Simmonses’ house, and I don’t want anybody to see us. If we go this way they won’t.” And, taking the bucket in his right hand, he swung it at arms’-length backward and forward until the spring was reached. Filling it, he put the one knife, two forks, and two spoons in his pockets, and cautioning Colburn to be careful with the saucepan, which had in it the cups and saucers and plates, he hooked the coffee-pot to a button on his coat and started whistling down the hill.

“Give it to me.” The bucket of water was taken out of his hand, and with a quick stride Colburn led the way to where Taska was waiting on the banks of the water whose gay gleaming could be seen through the open spaces among the trees.



## VII

### A DOUBLE PLUNGE

FOR two hours fair luck was with them, and in the battered tin bucket at Cricket's feet a number of small fish flopped and floundered in protest at their cramped quarters, and, leaning over, he peered at them with pride that was joyous and unreserved.

"Twenty-three, I think," he said, and, putting in his hand, drew out a tiny speckled trout whose shining armor compensated for its lack of size, and held it up in the sunlight.

"That's what you call a beaut, ain't it?" The wriggling, squirming, fighting little fish was held first toward Taska and then toward Colburn. "Would you all mind if I took this one to Teenie? It's such a pretty one, and she's awful fond of pretty things."

"You can take a dozen to her. String her a bunch of the biggest, and we'll cook the rest. What time is it?" Taska looked at Colburn.

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"Something tells me it is lunch-time. I'm hungry as a bear."

Colburn looked at his watch. "Half past twelve. I'm as hungry as a hound, and Cricket's as hungry as a—"

"Pig." One by one Cricket picked out the fish and strung them carefully. "Pigs are always hungry, sometimes hungrier. Ain't that a dandy?" The string of fish held in the sunlight flashed glints of rainbow colors in their faces. "They ain't the biggest, though. Teenie wouldn't want the biggest. Must I pull back, Miss Taska?"

"I'll pull back." Slipping the oars into the rowlocks, Colburn dipped them in the water, and with an awkward and then smooth stroke pulled easily down the stream to where their lunch was waiting. As he rowed color which had long been lacking in his face came gradually into it, and at Cricket's questioning look he laughed slightly.

"At college I belonged to the boat crew, and later at the boat club I kept up practice for exercise, but it's been years since I've had a pair of oars in my hands." Swinging the boat into place, he steadied it as Cricket jumped out and pushed it on the bank that Taska might not dampen her shoes, then made it fast to the

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stake and followed her to the big rock, where already Cricket had lighted the fire and was filling the coffee-pot with the water brought from the spring.

"You'll have to eat with your fingers, Cricket."

Spreading a large linen napkin on the grayish grass, Taska put on it the two cups and saucers, and knife and forks and spoons, and opened carefully a small package of sugar. "We were very stingy, Cricket and I, when we bought our things"—she turned to Colburn—"but we didn't expect to have guests when we made our purchases. At the San few of the people care to take exercise, and our primitive pleasures wouldn't appeal, so we only got enough for ourselves. Where's the pie, Cricket?"

"Here 'tis."

With a long, luxurious indrawing of his breath Cricket reached behind and drew from under a branch of brown and russet leaves a good-sized pie, and with a tight closing of his left eye and a tilt of his chin he nodded at Colburn and held it toward him.

"Miss Taska don't eat pie, but I never saw a man what didn't eat it. Ain't but one kind of pie I don't like, and that's a thin pie. This is just for you and me, and we don't have to

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leave any for manners. Gee, I'm hungry! I don't mind eating with my fingers, and I can drink my coffee out of the dipper if you all don't mind. When you're empty as air it don't make much difference how you get the things to your mouth. I mean outdoors it don't make much difference. Are you 'most ready, Miss Taska?"

It was a merry meal. For half an hour there was uninterrupted effort to appease the demand of open-air appetites, and for the first time since Baywood had been entered the taste of food was good to Colburn. With it all was a curious naturalness, as if so informal a lunch were an every-day affair; and with surrender to a nameless something that was strangely pleasant he ate as he had not eaten for weeks, and even months, before.

The last bit of pie in Cricket's hand was looked at doubtfully and then put in his mouth. "Guess I can squeeze that in, but I couldn't another piece if it weren't any bigger than a pin-point. I'm as full as a tick, and, Lord, I'm happy!"

With a twist of his body he stretched out on his back and blinked up at the sun. "Ain't you glad you're living?" He waved his hand toward Colburn. "I ain't going to be glad at five o'clock, which is when I'll be milking, but

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'tain't any reason why you can't be glad some-time just because you can't be all the time. Mis' Lemmon don't see it that way. She was born doleful, and doleful she'll die, and all on account of maybes. Ever know a maybe person, Mr. Colburn?"

"Don't know that I have. I'm not sure that I know what kind of a person a maybe person is."

"A maybe-er is a female person generally. That is, all I know are females, though a lot of ladies ain't and some men are. Miss Taska ain't. They're this kind." Hands clasped under his head and knees up, Cricket eyed a bird that was sailing across the sky. "If that bird was a thinker and could think it might think like this: Maybe there's a man down there with a gun, and maybe he is going to shoot and I'd better not fly round to-day. That's Mis' Lemmon. She's always thinking something is going to happen. If it rains maybe the crops will rot, and if it's dry maybe there'll be a drought, and every time a calf or a pig or a lamb or a baby gets born she thinks maybe it will die before it's grown up. And she's afraid to put her money in the bank for fear it may be stolen, and if you've got a pain in the back of your neck she always says it may be

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that appendix thing. She's cheerful nix, she is! Regular mushroom kind. Only thing that ever flourishes in damp and darkness is mushrooms, I read in a book once, but the man who wrote it didn't know Mis' Lemmon. If she can squint hard luck out of a happening she'll squint before it starts to come, and she's disappointed if it don't. Her husbands died. Hold on, Miss Taska!"

Springing to his feet, Cricket began to help Taska gather up the china and wash it, and a few minutes later, all things being again in order and the fire replenished, the book was brought and put in Taska's hands.

"Mr. Colburn doesn't know Mrs. Lemmon, Cricket." Taska spread out the rain-coat, always brought for possible need, and settled herself comfortably on the ground, back against the rock and book in her lap. "The other day you told me it wasn't square to talk about people behind their backs."

"It ain't. But I've said it to her face—what I said to him." His hand was waved in Colburn's direction. "She sent me to bed for it and said the Lord had made her that way, and if it was the will of the Lord for her to be mistrusting she wasn't a-going contrary to His will. She says she don't believe in shutting your eyes

## A DOUBLE PLUNGE

to evil and danger and death. She's terrible afraid of death and always looking out for it. You know yourself she's got the damndest good sight for dark-sidedness that—"

"Cricket!"

"Three times to-day!" Three fingers were held up in the air, then slowly the third knot was tied. "Not a word for a week and all at once broke out like the measles. What you reckon makes me do it, Miss Taska? Couldn't be the will of the Lord, could it?"

"I think not."

String still in his hands, Cricket looked at the three knots reflectingly. "Mis' Lemmon lays so much on the will of the Lord that I thought maybe He might have made me this way for a purpose. Don't see how anything could be made out of it lessen it was holding back what you want to let out, but—"

For a moment there was silence, then presently, hands in his pockets, Cricket looked up.

"I don't reckon you'd better read any to-day, Miss Taska. The last time was about a lady. I thought I was coming on, but I ain't, and 'tain't any use trying. I was 'lowed to do it when I was little; my father 'lowed me and used to laugh, and it's too late now." His lips twitched, and, turning away, he looked over



## THE HOUSE OF HAPPINESS

the water to the opposite bank. "It's too late."

"Not on your life!" Taska opened the book and spread it on her lap. "You've done better than I have, and we're going to read this morning with five pages cut out. Cricket and I made a bargain." She turned to Colburn and laughed lightly. "I had a habit of thinking about things it didn't help to think about, and he had one of using certain words there was no need of using. We agreed to break our bad habits. We're getting along, but we have a setback every now and then. If you don't care to listen we won't mind if you go for a walk."

"I'd like to listen."

Stretched on the dry grass, chin in his hand and elbow on the ground, Colburn settled himself some little distance from the rock against which Taska was leaning, and close to which, at her feet, Cricket was lying face forward, heels in the air, and eyes eagerly watching those bent over the well-used copy of *Huckleberry Finn*. He did not listen, however, for as the words of the opening chapter reached him pictures of very different scenes came before him disconnectedly, and the one in which he found himself seemed the only one that was definite or decided or desirable. It might never happen



## A DOUBLE PLUNGE

again, a morning of so simple and natural and wholesome pleasuring, and he wondered that it should have happened to-day.

Changing his position slightly, he looked at the girl, who had apparently forgotten his presence, and for some minutes let his eyes take in the contour of the oval face, the long lashes covering the gray eyes, around whose pupils were the deep, dark circles which gave them at times appealing and again most baffling charm, and most of all he watched her mouth, full-lipped and sweet, and of a modeling that gave to its sweetness strength.

For some time thought was held in abeyance, and then he tried to imagine Isabel McLean in her place. He could not think of Isabel as reading aloud. She was not fond of reading, and, though he had the new novels sent to her, it rarely happened that she mentioned a writer he cared for; those she did mention he knew only as writers to avoid.

Nor could he imagine her in a sweater and leaning against a rock. Isabel never leaned. She was too stately, too perfectly groomed and gowned to sit on the grass, and no combination could be more incongruous than the freckle-faced, clear-eyed, happy-hearted boy and Isabel McLean. He liked that chap. Pity he couldn't

## THE HOUSE OF HAPPINESS

get the proper education. He was a keen observer for his years, and his comments clear-cut for a youngster. Miss Laird was obviously his divinity.

The book was closed suddenly. "I forgot what I was doing! I only left out four pages instead of five." Taska made effort to get up, but Cricket was holding her down in frantic, abject appeal.

"Oh, don't, don't stop yet!" His face was buried in her lap. "Don't leave off just when I couldn't sleep a wink if I didn't know how it ended! You ain't ever been a boy, and you don't know how hard it is to talk like a lady all the time; and if you'll just finish that chapter—"

"Wish I could, but I can't. A broken bargain gets what it deserves, and deserves what it gets. If we're going on the lake we must hurry." This time Taska was up. "We've got to be back at the San by three o'clock."

On his feet Cricket turned his back and ran the sleeve of his coat across his face and swallowed with difficulty. Presently he turned again and nodded to Colburn. "I'm going back to the box," he said, "to take the things. Want to go?"

## A DOUBLE PLUNGE

On the lake luck deserted them, and after half an hour of patient waiting Cricket pulled up his line and put it in the boat.

"It's too deep here," he said; "never could do anything right in the middle. Over yonder is where the biggest fish Mr. Snowden ever got came from. He told me so himself. Reckon we'd better try it?"

"Better try something. Be careful, Cricket!" Taska's hand was held out warningly. "You mustn't stand up, the boat is too small!"

Already Cricket was up, however, and as he started toward the seat where he could take the oars from the side of the boat and put them in the locks his foot slipped. With a lurch he fell forward. Colburn's hand swung out to catch him, but a splash in the water told him he was too late, and instantly he was on his feet and coat and vest thrown off.

"Oh, God!" Taska, too, was up. "Look at that!"

On the blade of the oar a few drops of blood gleamed in the sunlight. "He struck himself in falling." And again the waters closed and Colburn, too, was out of sight.

For a black moment, two moments, there was stillness, horrible stillness, and with wide eyes Taska watched the surface of the water.

## THE HOUSE OF HAPPINESS

On it Cricket's cap floated shoreward, and toward her Colburn's hat came close enough to be drawn in. Wet and dripping, she held it with tense tightness, and the beating of her heart seemed to stop.

Why didn't they come up? Cricket was a good swimmer, but if he were stunned! Could Colburn find him? It might mean Colburn's death, a plunge in water on such a day as this! And she had asked him to come! Her hands dug into each other, but her lips made no sound, and only the gleaming sunlight broke the smooth surface of the lake.

If in a moment more they did not come up she must pull to the shore and get help. The nearest house was the Simmonses'. She would have to go back to the place they had just left. For a swift second she closed her eyes, and wordless prayer surged over her; then again she looked upon the water.

"Pretty long in finding him, wasn't I?"

With a steady stroke of his right arm Colburn was swimming toward the boat. Under his left, Cricket, still unconscious, was held firmly, and as he reached her the girl on her knees held out her arms.

"Give him to me," she said, and, the hold on herself loosening, a half-sob came from her lips.

## A DOUBLE PLUNGE

Pulling the boy into the bottom of the boat, she turned to Colburn. "Are you—are you all right?" she asked. "Can you get in?"

It was not an easy thing to do, but the tricks of early days came to him, and with a swift movement Colburn was in the boat again, and quickly his hands were on the oars.

"The nearest place," he said; "where is it?"

"The one we came from. You must let me row. You are too tired, and you will be ill and frozen. Oh, why—"

"I'll be frozen if I don't row. It will only take a few minutes. He'll be all right when we get him on shore. Throw that coat over him, will you? The wind is pretty strong. Place his head a little lower than his feet."

Leaning forward, she handed the coat to Colburn as the oars were put in the water. "Put this on before you start." Her voice was still a bit unsteady. With her rain-coat she wrapped the child carefully. As his eyes slowly opened she caught his hands and held them to her heart. "Oh, Cricket! Cricket!"

Dazedly the boy made effort to rise. With swift, long strokes the boat was shooting over the water, and already their lunching-ground and the smoldering fire could be seen in the distance, and unsteadily he put his hand to his head.

## THE HOUSE OF HAPPINESS

"What 'd I do this time, Miss Taska?"

His head fell back into her lap, and dizzy faintness closed his eyes again. Bending, she wiped his face with her handkerchief, rubbed his hands, then, lifting her eyes, found Colburn's on her, and in them read his understanding that her thought was for the boy alone, and for a moment swift color filled her face.

"I can't thank you! I can't breathe quite well yet." Her voice broke, and she looked away. "We do not often go upon the lake. He can't keep still, and I ought not to have gone to-day. A month ago I promised that next time we'd try the lake, but I oughtn't to have promised. It is all my fault—and you may be ill!"

"I'm not going to be ill, and you are not a maybe person. Cricket told me so an hour ago. I take a cold bath every day; an extra one won't hurt. Take care!"

The boat grated on the bank, and, springing out, Colburn pulled it up and held his hand to Taska. "Run up and fix the fire," he said. "I'll bring Cricket."

With the boy in his arms he started to the rock near which the fire was burning vigorously again, but at the first few steps Cricket opened his eyes and tried to get upon his feet.

## A DOUBLE PLUNGE

"I'm all right." This time his gaze was no longer bewildered. "Put me down, please, Mr. Colburn. Oh, please put me down! They don't let Tubers tote anything, and I've done enough damage to-day. Please—you must—you've got to!" And so violent were his efforts to release himself from Colburn's arms that the latter had to hold him with a grip unduly tight.

"In a minute I'll put you down. We're not there yet."

"But you may spit a ruby. Tubers do when they're tired, Mis' Lemmon says. Ain't I done enough to-day? You may be sick if—"

"Who's a maybe-er now? Get up close to that fire and dry out. You'll be cooked in a few minutes if you can stand the heat. I'm all right except my feet. They're a bit chilly. Where's Miss Laird?"

Already out of sight, Taska was running to the Simmons house, and in a time incredibly short even to the shivering man and boy they saw her hurrying back, and with her Mrs. Simmons. In their hands were blankets and bottles, and behind were the Simmons boys, between them a big kettle of hot water, and in their eyes eager excitement at the orders which had



## THE HOUSE OF HAPPINESS

been given them to take it from the kitchen stove and come at once, and that quickly.

Cricket, still close to the fire, eyed the kettle contemptuously. "Leaks," he said to Colburn. "Simmonses always were shiftless. Miss Taska's face's as white as my nest-egg. You'd better get her back quick, Mr. Colburn. She ain't strong enough to run like that, and she's out of breath. O Lord, to think I done it! I'd be drownded like my mother and father if 'twarn't for you, and you may be dead on account of me, and I ain't worth it! I ain't worth it! I ain't got any blood kin, and you and her got so many to care, and there ain't anybody to care 'bout me!"

Reaction had set in; and, throwing himself face forward on the ground, stifling sobs came from the lips pressed shamedly together to keep back sound; and, stooping, Colburn put his hand on the shaking shoulders.

"I'd have cared, Cricket. I'd have cared very much. I think we're going to be good friends. And Miss Laird would have cared more than you understand. Quick! Get up! She's coming!"

Turning slowly, Cricket sat up and with the end of the rain-coat in which he was wrapped he wiped his eyes.



## A DOUBLE PLUNGE

“ ’Twas my damned wriggling what did it.”  
He stopped, and again his eyes filled. “Four times to-day,” he said, dejectedly, “and I might be in hell this minute for it if it hadn’t been for you!”

## VIII

### LETTERS

COLBURN raised his head and looked at the two people crossing the lawn as long as they were in sight, then took up his letters and began to open them.

It was extremely silly, his being kept a prisoner on the veranda of his cottage; and were it not for the note in his pocket and the fleeting, indefinable appeal which had passed, as a shadow passes, over Miss Laird's face when yesterday she had stopped and spoken to him as he lay rug-covered in his long chair, he would have gone to his meals as usual and stopped this nonsense which the Doctor was enforcing. The indications were he was going to detest the Doctor as heartily as Holman hated him. An un-get-rid-able antipathy to a soft voice in a man, together with the feeling that he was being figuratively patted whenever he appeared, made his coming something from which he shrank with peculiar aversion, and

## LETTERS

for the past three days there had been occasion to shrink with irritating regularity.

Taking a letter from its envelope, he put on his glasses and began to read, then put it down and tapped the arm of his chair with his long, slender fingers. The letter was from Ralstone in regard to the Colesworth house. Certainly it had not increased in value during the past few months, and yet Ralstone wrote the best terms he could make were several thousand dollars in advance of what the property had been offered him before he was taken sick. Strange—He threw the letter on the table. There was no hurry in regard to its answer, and the day was too perfect to bother with things of this kind.

“Hello, there!”

Colburn looked up. Harnish and Holman were crossing the lawn, and as they neared his cottage they waved their hands. Both were in riding-clothes, and for a moment envy possessed him.

“Where to?” he asked, and leaned forward with interest. “Good rides about here?”

“Bully.” Harnish tapped the tip of his boot with the butt end of his crop. “Wish you could go. Miss Laird’s going. Holman hates a horse, but he’s learning to take what he can get. Any tem. to-day?”

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## THE HOUSE OF HAPPINESS

"Believe not." Colburn leaned back. "Never has been any worth noticing."

"Merely precautionary, my friend, merely precautionary!" Holman's voice was in exact imitation of the Doctor's. "If pneumonia had only developed you'd have been immortalized. No bad effects from a cold plunge to save an unknown chappie is disappointing to hero-worshippers. Miss Warriner weeps when she thinks of what might have happened. Coming out to-night?"

"Hope to. It's all rot, this sort of thing." Colburn's eyes lifted, and again he watched the couple he had seen passing a few minutes before; and, turning, Holman saw them also.

For a moment his eyes narrowed, then he shrugged his shoulders. "The infinite variety of fools in this world is equaled only by the infinite variety of their combinations. Somebody ought to kill that man."

"She's a pretty little thing." Harnish turned and followed the couple with puzzled eyes. "Her husband's worth a good many millions, and there are two children. What on earth she sees in him—"

"Sees what she's never seen before." Holman brushed a speck off his doeskin trousers. "His mind is the most brilliant I've ever come across, and his soul the size of a black-eyed pea."

## LETTERS

He's been everywhere, studied everything, and cares no more for law and order than he cares for last year's calendars. Looks like a country bumpkin one minute and a poet another, with his careless dress and burning eyes. Hello! There's Miss Laird!"

A moment later as they passed down the road Colburn lifted his hat in answer to the wave of Taska's hand and watched her until out of sight. She had a good mount and rode well, but a habit was hardly becoming to a woman of her type. She was too tall and slender. Still, in it, as in everything else, she was distinctive. Apparently, she did not care greatly for clothes, and at times they seemed to have been put on in a hurry, yet even carelessness could not make her commonplace. In each costume she was a different personality. Pictures of her passed before him. Brilliant and bizarre, an evening gown of deep red and dull gold made her one person, the sweater and buttoned boots another, and now this habit, but best of all he liked her in the simple dark-blue dress in which he had first seen her and in which in his dream she had come to him and made the pain grow less. He wished— With an impatient frown he took up the letter from Isabel McLean and began to read it.

## THE HOUSE OF HAPPINESS

MY DEAR RIVES,—I am glad to know from your letter of yesterday that you are better satisfied with Baywood. From your first letters I was afraid you would not be willing to stay, and Mrs. Macomber says you would make a mistake to go anywhere else. She made some valuable acquaintances there. All the people she met were of prominent families, and it is most unfortunate if one has to be thrown with people one does not care to know. I hope the winter months will pass quickly. If you improve as rapidly as Dr. Masters expects, you ought to be able to come home in the spring and take up things again. Of course, it is very awkward for me. Mother insists that nothing shall be said about our engagement. Its announcement would mean for me a very dull winter, but I wish it had been announced. I hope your business will not suffer during your absence. Chances are often lost, Merrie says, and as you can't be here, you are fortunate to have him act for you. He is so interested in the purchase of the Colesworth house, and knows why you want it. I thought it best to tell him. I will be so glad when it is all settled. Yesterday at Maria Perkinson's luncheon everybody agreed it is the handsomest house in the city, and every woman there wanted it. I could say nothing, but I enjoyed the surprise awaiting when they learn it is to be my house. Already I am interested in furniture of all periods and making them a study. There isn't a bit of news. Do take care of yourself. I was afraid you were sick. Only one letter last week, and at first you wrote three or four. Don't worry if mine don't come exactly on time. There is much going on, and dressmakers take endless hours. When I'm married I shall get my things in New York and stop this strain of dealing with incompetents. Mother sends love. With much from me,

Affectionately,

ISABEL.



## LETTERS

The letter was put in its envelope and then thrown upon the table by his side. Hands clasped behind his head and feet outstretched under the rug which covered them, Colburn, with brow wrinkled in fine folds, for some time looked with unseeing eyes across the wide, sloping lawn, and in his mind revolved a good many things that were beginning to need definite decisions.

Unless there could be for him a clean bill of health there should be no marriage. He had ideas of his own concerning matters of this kind, and until perfectly well the thought of marriage was not to enter his mind. He must write Isabel frankly. She must not continue under the impression that he would be all right in the spring. He would not be all right. There were other things, too, he must write Isabel about. In some way she had acquired a very inflated idea of his financial condition. He could afford to buy the Colesworth house. His eyes narrowed. He didn't like the looks of this jump in price. There was nothing to explain or justify it. Though he had given Ralstone power of attorney, he had not expected him to exercise it without acquainting him in advance with the reason for so doing, and had expected him to act only in certain details

## THE HOUSE OF HAPPINESS

requiring immediate attention; still this might not be entirely understood by Ralstone, and Isabel's reference to the latter acting for him was a bit disquieting. He could watch the markets and wire his broker as quickly as Ralstone, and if there was any idea of extending friendliness along this line it must be stopped at once. He would write both to-morrow.

For some time he lay back in his chair and let all manner of fleeting thoughts come and go and then come back again, and presently he took a note out of an inside pocket and read it slowly. It was written the day after the fishing party.

The Doctor tells me this morning there will be no trouble [it began] if you will just be careful, and I am writing to ask if you will not, for Cricket's sake, do what he wishes you to do. I know you hate the system, but if you knew how Cricket has suffered from feeling he is responsible for a possible set-back you would be generous and do what I am asking. Cricket is heartbroken. For the first time he understands what it means to suffer from anxiety, and Mrs. Lemmon is understood as never before. Long before breakfast this morning he was at my cottage to know how you were. It was so splendid, Mr. Colburn! He is my little friend, and I love him, and you saved his life!

TASKA LAIRD.

Putting the note back in his pocket, he again looked at his unread letters. One directed in a large, round hand on a soiled and cheap envelope

## LETTERS

attracted his attention, and, breaking it open, he glanced at the labored writing with mild speculation as to its writer, then read it with eyes that in the reading grew blurred a little bit.

DEAR MR. RIVES COLBURN.

DEAR SIR,—I can't sleep a wink to-night. It's three o'clock by the kitchen clock, where I am, and I never prayed so hard in my life. And if the Lord wants me to be a preacher, which I ain't fit by nature for, I'll be one, if He will only keep you from getting sick and there ain't any bad effex from saving of me yesterday. Mis' Lemon thinks it was the will of the Lord, but I think it was my riggling. If I'd set still it wouldn't have happened. I was born a rigglar, same as a swearer, and both are bad. I don't know how to thank you. And this is to say I ain't much. I'm just a boy without any blood kin, but all I am is for you, Mr. Colburn. You won't ever go where I can't find you. There ain't but one kind of a friend I can be, not having money or book learning or things like that, but Miss Taska says love makes up for a lot of other things what's lacking.

Respectfully,

CRICKET JOSEPHUS HAMMILL.

For some time the scrawly pages were kept out of their envelope, but after a while the latter was put in his pocket, and, taking off his glasses, Colburn wiped them long and carefully.

A noise on the graveled path made him look up. Mr. McKenzie in a fur coat and arms filled with books was standing at the foot of the steps.

## IX

### A BIT OF NEWS

“REMARKABLE weather, this! Remarkable!”

Mr. McKenzie laid his books down carefully, rattled the chair Colburn placed for him, shook out the rug, took his seat, covered his feet, and, fastening his fur coat, leaned back and eyed his host with eyes so squinted that Colburn wondered how anything could be seen by them.

He was not sorry the little man had come. Each day he had stopped to make inquiries, and under his querulous intolerance and seeming snappiness was a wealth of warm-heartedness, and, moreover, his caustic comments were entertaining.

“I hate the idea of my lungs being benefited by Yankee air, but we must admit that for our particular trouble this climate has its advantages. Smoke?” A handful of cigars was thrust in Colburn’s face.

“Not yet. I have no trouble with my

## A BIT OF NEWS

throat, but I'm not permitted the comfort of a cigar."

"My dear suh"—the South-Carolinian struck a match with such energy that it broke and fell upon the floor—"when you live as long as I have you will decide for yourself what comforts you are entitled to. I'm moderate. I never take but two a day. For three years I gave up smoking. At that time I imagined when I was prohibited it was for a personal reason, and not on a general principle. They were hard years, suh, but they taught me much that has been profitable since."

A long, luxurious puff of the excellent cigar was taken, then he leaned forward suddenly.

"Have you seen Taska this morning?"

The suddenness and irrelevancy of the question was disconcerting, and, leaning forward, Colburn took the copy of the *Religio Medici* from the table where his visitor had placed it.

"She passed just now on horseback with Holman and Harnish." He opened the book carefully. "This looks like a precious possession. I do not wonder that you prize it."

"Where did they go? She didn't tell me she was to ride this morning." Mr. McKenzie forgot his cigar for a moment while his eyes squinted across the lawn. "I can't under-

## THE HOUSE OF HAPPINESS

stand Dr. Browner letting her take all this exercise. That fishing business with its excitement did her no good, and now she's off again. She can't stand it. I know her like a book; knew her parents before her. Her father was a fine writer and ripe scholar, but no fighter of life. He ought to have had a big church in a city, and instead he was buried in the country with a little congregation which could barely pay his little salary, and how they managed is a mystery known only to his wife and God Almighty. He had no executive ability, no organizing power, and a modern church needs both, they tell me, and spiritual mindedness won't do the work. He was a poet and thinker and dreamer; yes, he was a dreamer, and there's no place in the world to-day for dreams. Taska got her spirit from her mother, and she'll die with her head up. No matter how death comes, she'll meet it with a smile and bid it welcome if come it must, but she wants to live. She wants to live!"

Colburn put the book down and moved his chair out of the range of his visitor's eyes. He was not cold, but he was shivering. "Is her mother living?" he asked, not knowing what he said, for Taska had told him she was dead.

"Died two years after her husband. There's

## A BIT OF NEWS

a brother in Nebraska, married, with several children and no pennies to spare, and there's a married sister with no children and more money than she needs. Both wanted Taska to live with them after her mother's death, and both were visited, and then she went to work. The bread of others is not sweet to Taska, and, moreover, she's full of this modern foolishness of independence. It's a damned outrage, suh, this letting women go into the world of business and struggle for a livelihood! It's against nature, and they've no right to want to earn their living!"

"Women have always earned their living."

Mr. McKenzie looked up. "I don't understand you, suh."

"I said women have always earned their living—that is, the large majority of them have. The parasitic class is a small one. Under present conditions they get a definite wage or salary or income, or whatever the equivalent for service may be termed, and in other days they didn't. It is unfortunate for a woman to be forced into the world of labor. Men should prevent the necessity, but if they are unable to prevent it I admire her for facing the fact and meeting the situation. I often wonder, indeed, if this is not the heroic age of human history,



## THE HOUSE OF HAPPINESS

this age of adjustment to new needs, to change and overthrow and—”

“Heroic!” The South-Carolinian’s voice rose shrill and high in piping protest. “This age heroic? This pushing, crowding, money-loving age, with life turned topsyturvy and women working side by side with men! And you a Virginian, suh! I’m surprised at you! I fail to see where the heroic part comes in.”

“A great many people fail to see.” Colburn leaned forward, hands clasped loosely between his knees. “Battle-fields and blare of trumpets are usually the setting of heroic parts, and glory and honor are their rewards. The brave acceptance of changed conditions, the unloved work that is daily done gets little recognition. What did Miss Laird do?”

“Went on a newspaper.” Mr. McKenzie kicked the chair in front of him with fretful impatience. “I can’t speak of it quietly—this frightful innovation of women being wage-earners. If Taska would not live with her brother and sister she should have married and had a home of her own. She’s had chances enough, and her refusal is beyond comprehension.”

“Perhaps she has certain old-fashioned ideas as well as you.”



## A BIT OF NEWS

"What's old-fashioned ideas got to do with it? Besides, she hasn't any—I mean in matters of that kind she has very new ideas, and she refuses to marry unless—"

"She loves the man who is to be her husband? With the best type of modern woman I believe that is the present attitude of mind. It is usually accepted as an old-fashioned idea that a woman should marry for love, but I believe you are right in thinking that many women formerly married for a home, married because it was the thing to do. The flavor of romance is deepened by distance, and perhaps this prosaic, this commonplace, this materialistic age in which woman is becoming self-respectingly independent will, after all, prove the age of real romance, the age in which marriage will be based on those things which shall preserve it from dullness and degradation and make it—"

"*I think women formerly married for a home! I think they married because it was the thing to do!*" Mr. McKenzie was out of his chair and his hands were beating the air. "I don't understand you, suh! I think nothing of the kind. It is to-day they marry for such things!"

"But didn't you say just now Miss Laird should marry some one of the men who wanted

## THE HOUSE OF HAPPINESS

to marry her? If she did not care for any one of them—”

“But she could have cared if she had wanted to!” Hands were now opening and shutting in quick, nervous movements, and Mr. McKenzie began walking backward and forward across the porch.

“Taska is foolishly exacting in her affections. She says she will never marry any man unless she would rather be with him in the desert of Sahara than away from him in Paradise. She’s a queer mixture of her mother and her father, and I’ve no patience with such nonsense. She must be her husband’s good friend, his comrade in reality, she says, and all that modern nonsense. I reverence woman, but she should thank her Maker if she has a good man to love her and shield and protect her. She was meant by the Almighty to marry and make a home for—”

“The man she loves and who loves her—yes.” Colburn, too, got up, and in his face was sudden whiteness and weariness, and in his voice unconscious bitterness.

“And for no other reason on God’s earth should she make it. On no other basis can a man and a woman make a home out of a house. I think Miss Laird is entirely right.”

## A BIT OF NEWS

"She's going away. Did you know it?"

Colburn stopped as suddenly as the question was asked abruptly.

"Going away?" Stooping, he picked up Isabel McLean's letter that had blown off the table and put it back. His breath came a little unsteadily, then he straightened and looked across the lawn.

"I am glad she is able to go home," he said; and the strained note in his voice was evident to himself. "I congratulate her."

"She isn't going home. Didn't I tell you she has no home?" Mr. McKenzie's voice was more querulous than ever. He was frankly worried; and, taking out his handkerchief, he wiped his face with quick, jerky movements, then he sat down.

"Where is she going? To her sister's?"

"Sister's! Didn't I tell you she wouldn't live with her sister? Mrs. Heatherman is a woman of fashion and acquainted with sham, and her taste and Taska's are as apart as mine and a modernist's. Mrs. Heatherman's husband has a great deal of money, and her chief occupation is feeding the wealthy and buying new clothes, and neither of those things interests Taska. She is the older, but the difference in their natures, their characters, makes her depend

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upon and look up to Taska, who is the one human being she really loves besides herself. She won't like it, Taska's leaving here, but when the latter makes up her mind you might as well blink at the moon and beg it to stop shining as try to stop her. Did you ever notice how many fine women can do fool things? To go away just when—"

"Where is she going?"

"To some out-of-the-way place in the mountains of Virginia. She doesn't care for the treatment here." Mr. McKenzie nodded confidentially, and his thin voice lowered to a fine whisper. "Between you and me she thinks there's a lot of durned nonsense at places of this sort, thinks patients get so pampered they're unfit for life after they leave. Sanitary house-parties are not to her liking. This old Doctor to whom she is devoted is something of a character, and Taska loves a character as much as she doesn't love commonplaceness and convention. He's coming soon to see her and will take her with him when he goes away."

Colburn looked up at the sky and said nothing. Over the latter a dull, sodden grayness seemed to be setting, and the sun, which an hour ago had been gaily shining, was gone. The air was sharp and chill, and he wished Mr.

## A BIT OF NEWS

McKenzie would go back to his own cottage. He was tired, tired of everything. Again he looked at the sky.

"I believe it is going to snow," he said.  
"The morning was fine, but—"

"It does look like snow." Mr. McKenzie jumped up and began to fasten his coat. "Might have known it. Women and weather are just alike. Never know what they'll do next. But I never thought of Taska's going away. I'm a confounded fool to care, suh, but I love the child! She carries cheer and courage, and she hides her own hurt, and when she goes the place won't seem the same. To you she's a stranger, and you won't miss her, but I'll miss her. I'm an old man and when she goes—Good-by, Mr. Colburn." The shriveled, well-shaped hand was held out, and, with a grip that hurt, Colburn shook it; then, as his visitor reached the bottom step, he turned and went into his room and locked the door.

## X

### A WALK AND A TALK

STANDING on the top step of the veranda of Baywood's main building, Colburn swept the scene before him with critical and appreciative eyes. The night before the first snow of the season had fallen. As far as hills and valley and winding roads could be seen, vast vistas of whiteness gleamed in the sunlight, and on their frozen surface reflected the brilliant glow of a cloudless sky.

Very clearly in sight was Fernleigh, where the Resters, as Cricket called them, were under the scientific treatment of Dr. Browner's brother, and many of its patients were the "cured" of Baywood who yet needed the care and watchful guardianship of expert attention. It was rather a clever idea of the brothers Browner, this apart but not divided arrangement. They were clever men. Personally, he thought them fakers, but they understood human nature and used their knowledge well.

## A WALK AND A TALK

For over a month he had followed faithfully their every order, done what he was told, and left undone the things he liked to do, and the report of his improvement was cheering, though cautious. He was certainly stronger. The weekly tests were satisfactory, but the underlying impression was always that of a serio-comic performance in which he was taking part, and it was difficult to accept as conclusive the technically phrased opinion concerning his condition which was given at regular intervals and with due state in the office of the big blond ruler of this little kingdom of the sick. With these opinions he was not satisfied, and yet—

“I am going to the village, Mr. Colburn. Would you like to go with me?” In her fur coat and veil-covered hat Taska Laird stood, hands in her muff, at the foot of the steps and looked at the man at the top. “The walking isn’t very good, but—”

“Good or bad, I want to go. Thank you for letting me.”

Hat in hand, Colburn came down the steps. “I am horribly tired of myself, and even more so of Harnish and Holman and the bunch who’ve been playing pool all the morning. Games were left out of my make-up. Are you going right away?”

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“As soon as you put on your rubbers.”

Taska looked down at Colburn's feet. “In some places the snow is very deep. You are not very careful, Mr. Colburn. Yesterday you came to dinner without your overcoat. It was very cold yesterday.”

“Was it?” Taking out his watch, Colburn looked at it. Three o'clock was what he read. They could hardly be back before five. He closed the watch and put it in his pocket. “I'll get the rubbers if you'll wait a minute. I should never have thought of them. Until lately I never had to think.”

Changing his overcoat for a heavier one and slipping on his overshoes, Colburn came out of his cottage, and joining Miss Laird, who had walked on ahead, swung easily into step with her down the road which wound in zigzag fashion to the little village some distance away. In the faces of both, stung by the clear, sharp air, was alert interest in the scene about them, and the mere act of walking gave keen and frank delight.

For some moments neither spoke, and then Taska looked up.

“Did you ever feel when something you have long wanted to happen is about to happen that you would like to stand on a hilltop and open



## A WALK AND A TALK

your arms to earth and sky and let the wind blow over you while you sang something, something you had to sing?" Her voice was gaily happy. "Did you ever feel that way?"

"I have never even hoped to have anything happen that could make me feel that way. I'm afraid I've lived on a pretty dead level. I know a little of the depths, but of the hill-tops of life—" He looked down in the face aglow with something not caused alone by sting of biting air, and his own changed color. "I think I can understand how such a thing might happen, but—"

"Oh, it will happen. The thing is just to want it bad enough, long enough, and never give up until you get it. I don't mean you're apt to be a Czar by wanting to be one, or that you and the moon-man are likely to learn each other's secrets, or out-of-reach things of that sort. I mean—" Again she laughed. "To tell isn't necessary. When I was young I couldn't decide whether I wanted to marry the President or a minister to a foreign court or a terribly rich person, or not marry and be something myself—the head of a great school for girls or a wonderful singer or painter, or any top-lofty thing that would take me out of the obscurity and deadness of the little village where

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I then lived. At the ambitious period of my life I was about seventeen, and there was nothing in all the big, wide world I wouldn't have undertaken with irresponsible confidence that in some way it would be done somehow. I wasn't afraid of a throne or a platform or the strongest of lights. I wanted to be in the light. I hated the country, its dullness and dreariness, and dreaming was the delight of my life." She looked up in his face. "Aren't girls queer?"

Into hers he looked with strange steadiness. "Are they?" he asked. "Personally, they've always represented the unknown quantity, but as for queerness—"

"You know as little of girls as the people of Timbuctoo know of you. They are queer. But the odd part of my dreams was the negligible interest I felt in the man I must marry if the craved glory and honor and prominence and power were to be provided. I can't remember for a moment being able to define him in any way. He was merely the means to an end."

"With a great many women the man of the marriage is merely the means to an end." Colburn stepped ahead and held out his hand. "This is a bad bit of road just here. You'll have to be careful going down this hill."

## A WALK AND A TALK

Safely down, he again turned to her. "Have the years brought a clearer vision?" His voice made effort to be light. "Or is the man still but a means to an end?"

She looked up. The turn of her head was quick and indignant. "You think I still think— I beg your pardon. I thought you meant what you said." She smiled. "I wonder sometimes that somebody doesn't keep a record of the successive decisions and ambitions of a girl's mind and heart concerning marriage. She isn't told in words, but so subtly is she made to understand that marriage is for her the ultimate object of life and the desirable destiny that she accepts the point of view not only without question, but begins early to speculate as to her future husband. It's all dead wrong."

"What? Marriage?"

"No." Her foot slipped on a rock under the snow and she stumbled slightly. "Came near going down that time. I hate hidden things!" Stooping, she brushed the snow from her shoe.

"Did you twist your ankle?" Colburn's voice was nervously anxious. "It was my fault. I should have gone ahead."

"It wasn't your fault, but it may have been your question." She laughed lightly. "Do I look like a person who doesn't believe in mar-

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riage? I certainly do—for other people. Decisions are a relief, aren't they? Now that I shall never marry, I can have all sorts of ideas and theories on the subject. What I think is wrong is for girls to feel marriage must be, anyhow or somehow. It should be the happiest life for men and women if they are honest men and women, and polite men and women, and in-love men and women, and—"

"You believe there should be qualifications for the high office." Hands in his pockets, Colburn looked ahead. "I'm afraid few of us think of it in that light. To many it is but the next step—that is, after we pass a certain age. In the days of our youth it is different, but the days of our youth are few."

Taska stopped. "I'm a very stupid person. I've a message for you. Last night I had a letter from my cousin, Janet Reynolds, in which she asked me to congratulate you for her on your engagement to Miss McLean." She held out her hand. "May I add mine also, Mr. Colburn. Miss McLean is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen, and I have seen a good many beautiful women."

Colburn lifted his hat, but the hand with which he touched Taska's was as cold as his face was hot.

## A WALK AND A TALK

"Thank you," he said, and his brow ridged in tiny purple folds. "You are very kind. May I ask how your cousin heard of—of my good fortune?"

"I don't remember. I read her letter very hurriedly. Oh yes." Taska thought a moment. "She said Mr. Ralstone had told her, and that you and Merriweather Ralstone were great friends."

Something undefinable in her tone made Colburn look at her searchingly. "I did not know he was a friend of yours."

"He isn't." The emphasis of her tone was significant. "I've known him for years. He's a distant connection and the most charming of talkers, but on his oath I wouldn't trust him. He is not a friend of mine."

For a moment there was curious silence. Ahead of them a blackbird hopped cautiously across the snow, and the low-hanging branches of the crystal-coated trees swung gaily in the light wind; but to Colburn the glow of the day was gone, and an unnamable indignation possessed him. If Isabel did not wish her engagement announced, why had she told Ralstone? Why had Ralstone told Miss Reynolds? Why had Miss Reynolds written to Miss Laird?

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He turned to the girl beside him. "Does Mr. Ralstone know you are at Baywood?"

"He knew it a month ago. I had a letter from him. I have not answered it, but I suppose he knows I am still here. I am going away next week."

She took a deep indrawing breath, and her head was held high. "I'm going to Piping Forest, where we look things in the face and are not afraid. That is why I am so happy, Mr. Colburn! I'm so tired of this fencing with facts. To run away from that which follows, to shut our eyes, to play and make believe, and to be fearing under the pretense of ignoring is such a queer way of living. And then, too, at Piping Forest there are things to do. Life in the large isn't there, but every type of human nature is. All the little tragedies and comedies and heartaches and happinesses and primal, elemental loves and hates are close at hand; and he's there, the only man I ever knew who had an understanding heart."

Colburn reached up his hand, and, pulling low a branch of the tree he was passing, let it swing back and scatter its spraylike snow, but he made no comment on the information given. It should not matter where she went. It should not matter that she was going. Had he not

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just received her congratulations? He laughed harshly and then coughed to strangle the strange sound.

"You must know Dr. Grannere, Mr. Colburn." Taska's voice was joyous. "I think you and he would be good friends. He was a schoolmate of my father's, and, though for many years he lived abroad, their weekly letters never failed to come and go. Somehow he's always seemed like some one in a book, his life has been so odd in one sense, so simple in another. His grandfather was from Normandy, and came to America when a very young man. On the boat coming over was a young Russian girl whose father was on some diplomatic business for his government, and very promptly they fell in love. A month after they landed they ran off and were married. It made a dreadful fuss. She was very lovely and well born, and, though his family was good, he had no money with which to pay the bills, and there will be bills! Neither was accustomed to economizing, and they had a hard time, I imagine, but they were so in love, the story goes, that nothing mattered.

"At the birth of her baby the mother died, and the father took the child to Louisiana, where he grew up and married a Creole beauty of New Orleans. My Doctor is their son. After his



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graduation he went abroad and lived for years in France. There something happened, something of which he never speaks, and, coming to Virginia, he practically buried himself at Piping Forest, a quaint old place built in the days when Washington was surveying the state, and there he has lived ever since. After a while he woke up, as it were, and for years his home has been a little world of its own, a world apart, but a world of peace where one finds the things one has lost in other places. My father knew what brought him back, but not even to my mother did he tell what to him alone was told, and it is so far away now that its memory is no longer bitter. It may never have been bitter. I do not know. I only imagine there must have been a very cruel sorrow, or else he could not understand the queer, strange mistakes we make, or the hopes and fears and joys and—" She stopped and, putting her hand to her eyes, shaded them from the sun, still brilliant, though nearing the white battlements of the hills.

"Isn't that Cricket?" Her hand was waved, and, laughing, she looked at the man beside her. "Upon you has been laid a great responsibility, Mr. Colburn. Hereafter you are to be followed blindly, and a young life is to be



## A WALK AND A TALK

patterned after yours. His adoration is dumb, but it is very deep."

"Take care!"

Colburn put out his hand and pulled Taska closer to his side of the road. A sleigh, without bells and driven rapidly, had turned in just ahead, and as it passed its occupants bowed, and Taska's eyes were raised perplexedly to Colburn's.

"She promised me she would not go with him this morning." In her voice was indignation and distress. "What can you do with a person who does not tell the truth?"

"Nothing." Colburn's shoulders shrugged imperceptibly. "When a lady lies— Hello, Cricket! Been skating to-day?"

## XI

### LUMPS AND BUMPS

CRICKET, sitting opposite Mr. Colburn, put down his knife and fork, pushed back his plate, and looked at his host with eyes that were searching and uncertain. They were big and blue and bright eyes, that were bigger and bluer and brighter for their setting in a round, freckled face and for the close-cropped curly head that was deeply red; and from them little could be long concealed. They were indeed what might be called inquiring eyes.

Colburn raised his. "What's the matter? Can't you eat your dinner?"

Cricket shook his head. "Ain't hungry. It's a funny thing. I've been wanting to take dinner in this here hotel ever since it was built. Once I saved up thirty-eight cents. It costs seventy-five, don't it?"

"I'm not sure of the price." Colburn took up a glass of water and eyed it carefully. "What are you going to have for dessert?"

For a full moment there was indecision.

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Long desire and immediate inability fought a short fight, then again Cricket shook his head.

"Three kinds of pie and ice-cream and cake and nuts and raisins" — his lips trembled slightly—"and I can't swallow a one. Last week I could have et—" Wrathfully he sat up and his eyes blinked rapidly to keep back that which *should* not come out. Leaning forward, he put his hand on his chest.

"Did you ever feel as if you had something right here which was digging a great big empty nothing inside of you, Mr. Colburn? Did you?"

"I don't know just exactly what—"

"Then you never had it. If you'd ever had it you'd know. First time I ever had it was the night after—" Over the freckled face color crept to the temples. "When I was 'fraid you were going to be sick on account of me. Got it again to-day. It's been coming ever since she told me she was going away, and now she's went it's a lump as big as—"

Safety was in silence, and Colburn, taking the card, ordered cheese and coffee from the low-bending waiter and looked across the room at a couple in a far-off corner. He was not given to demonstration, but a desire to draw the boy close to him possessed him curiously. The

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child was suffering. In his starved life there had been so little to love, so few to inspire the loyal affection of which he was capable, that to have go out of it the one being who to him represented all that was wonderful and beautiful and splendid was a tragedy; and with an understanding that was new-born and sweet, with a strange bitterness he felt for him a sympathy that must have no words, but yet was strong and deep.

"We all have lumps now and then. They're part of the game." Colburn's voice was amazingly cheerful. "You haven't the only one that's about in the world. Everybody—"

"I've kinder got used to bumps." Cricket again sat back in his chair. "Mis' Lemmon told when she first took me there was plenty of 'em, and I needn't think it was any rose-bush, primrose sort of path I was a-going over; but I don't believe anybody gets used to lumps. Of course, if you've never had them—"

"Oh, I've had them." With his spoon Colburn traced the pattern of a daisy on the tablecloth. "All human beings have them, but human beings are divided into two classes—those who talk about their lumps and those who keep them to themselves. No use making the other fellow lumpier by carting out your own

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and showing it around. While we are living—”

“What you reckon we’re living for, anyhow? ’Tain’t much to it, is it?”

“To what?”

“Living. Lumps and bumps and milking, and folks you love leaving you, and things happening what you didn’t know could happen, and your skates breaking when the ice is thickest, and— I tell you, when you ain’t got any blood kin and nobody cares, you don’t know what you was born for, anyhow. You can go to see her when you want to, but—”

Colburn put a lump of sugar in his coffee, and his eyes narrowed. He could go to see her when he wanted to! Could he? His head lifted.

“That mince-pie looks very nice, Cricket.” He beckoned to the waiter. “I think you could try a piece of that. When we’re through with dinner I’m going to the express office. I ordered some books last week. A couple of them are for you. It’s possible that they’ve come. I saw Mr. Jobson this afternoon, and he told me if they had got here he’d open up and let me have them to-night.”

Cricket was bolt upright. Up-leaping youth had rights not yet to be surrendered. Trouble was trouble, but joy was joy.

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"Lump-sick kind, maybe." Cricket's voice was that of cheerful understanding. "My lump feels right smart better. I don't mean it's gone; it won't ever all go till she comes back, but it's lighter than it was before I ate the pie. You couldn't live with a lump all the time, could you, Mr. Colburn?"

"It would be pretty dreary living. Still, some people—"

"It's your heart what makes lumps, ain't it? A heart certainly is a funny thing. I had one once what was a chicken's, and one what was a cow's. I killed the chicken, but the cow was Mr. Blane's. He cut her up to sell and gave me the heart. I wanted to see if I could find anything in 'em what makes a chicken cackle and cluck and a cow moo and moan. Ever hear a cow moan? I heard one once. She'd lost her calf. I run like the devil. I didn't find out anything from the hearts. I squeezed them till they warn't nothing but pulp, and I got so bothered about it I couldn't hardly sleep; and then I heard a fellow play a violin, and I sorter caught on how it might be. I ain't sure, though. Did you ever wish you didn't have a heart, Mr. Colburn?"

"There have been times, yes."

Colburn hurried his steps. Cricket had a

## LUMPS AND BUMPS

peculiar way of holding on to peculiar subjects. Why couldn't he talk about his books?

"Reckon you'll miss her too, won't you?"

"Miss who? Oh, Miss Laird? I will miss her very much."

"Must be an awful lonely place she's going to. It's way up on top a mountain, and there ain't a store or" — Cricket's steps dragged slowly; they were approaching Baywood's chief concession to the spirit of the age—"or a moving-picture show in it. I wouldn't like to live in a place where they didn't have moving pictures. Ain't it funny she wanted to go to a place like that?"

In electrically lighted letters over the former millinery shop of Mrs. Pinder the words "Around the World" blazed brilliantly, and Colburn slipped inside. The boy was wound up and must be stopped.

For half an hour Cricket sat in awed and quivering silence. The pictures were new and lurid and thrilling, and the spell was not to be broken by words. When, however, there were no more to be seen, and the precious books were under his arms and Colburn about to get in the village hack which would take him to the sanitarium, it being too late to walk, he took off his cap and held out his hand.

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"You've been bully about it, Mr. Colburn, and I'm much obliged to you for letting me go to the station with you to see her off, and for taking dinner with you, and for the books, and for—for all the things you've done for me. I didn't think there could be anybody I'd hate to see go way as bad as I'd hate to see her, but"—his voice trailed off into husky shyness—"but there is. You ain't going, are you, Mr. Colburn?"

"No chance that I see at present." Colburn leaned out of the shabby old vehicle and shook Cricket's hand. "Good night, old man. By the way, she told me you were to report to—"

"You. I am." Cricket on tiptoe bent forward eagerly. "I've got a new string. Had it a week, ain't got a knot in it yet. She said she'd trust me to fix on the number of pages, and now she's gone I reckon I'll have to make it harder for myself. It's going to be one page for 'gol darned,' and two for 'devil,' and three for 'hell,' and four for 'damn.'" He stopped and his face clouded. "Didn't I say something I oughtn't to just now?"

"I believe you did. Something about—"

"I said it. 'Twas before we saw the pictures. I said, 'Run like the devil.'"

Slowly the knot was tied in the string drawn



## LUMPS AND BUMPS

from around his neck. "The very first night," he said; and his lips quivered. "I don't reckon it's any use, Mr. Colburn. I prayed like hell last night that I wouldn't say a word to-day I oughtn't, and—"

Colburn closed the door of the carriage and nodded to the boy outside. "We won't count to-night," he called. "We'll begin to-morrow. Good night." And, settling himself in the uncomfortable old hack, he leaned back in a corner and closed his eyes as if to shut out what must not be seen.

For some minutes thought was held in abeyance; and then, one by one, they crept in front of him, came forward, slowly, shyly, darted away as misty shadows come and go, then came back boldly and passed again, those days of the five weeks which had been spent at Baywood. The hated first ones of unrest and irritation, the night he had met Taska, the long walks they had had together, the long quiet talks, the gay bits of conversation at the table, on the lawn, the books she had lent him, those he had lent her, the few rides and drives—one by one they came and went, and better, a thousand times better, during them had he learned to know her than he knew the woman he had asked to be his wife.

Was that true? He stirred uneasily. For

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some time he had tried to imagine he did not know Isabel McLean, but did he not know her very well? Her beauty did not blind him to certain other qualities, and if she were capable of loving deeply he was incapable of inspiring such love in her; and should they have married, the house in which they would have made their home could never have been a house of happiness.

Something that had hitherto been kept closely drawn was sharply pulled aside, and, leaning forward, his face was buried in his hands. For some minutes he made no effort to hold back truth that was very bitter, truth that was darkening what might have been of sweetness beyond dreaming, and then he sat up.

Surely the god that squares things had been busy with him of late. For his broken health he might be pardoned; but for this other, this beyond-pardon thing that he had done—When he had asked Isabel McLean to marry him he had believed himself honest in thinking he cared for her. Certainly he had cared for no one else, and love of which one reads in song and story was not the sort one met in ordinary lives, and he did not look for it in his. A negative life he might have lived, but that was before he knew. With eyes unseeing he

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stared into the darkness. He could not live it now. He would not live it now.

The carriage stopped. Getting out, Colburn handed the driver some money and went up the steps of his cottage. Opening his door, he turned on the lights and saw on the book-piled table a letter addressed in a handwriting unseen before, and the blood went to his face. He picked it up and held it to the light, then, tearing open its envelope, looked at its signature. It was as he thought. It was signed Eduard Grannere.

## XII

### ADMISSION AND ADVICE

FOR some minutes the letter was not read. Taking off his top-coat and hat, Colburn came back to the table, drew up his chair, and, leaning back in it, held the letter tightly in his hands. Was he to go or stay?

Very quickly he had understood why Taska should love the quaint and shabbily dressed old gentleman, with his white hair and skin as soft and warmly colored as a girl's. His face was clean-shaven, his mouth well shaped, and his brow fine and high; but it was his eyes which drew and held, his shrewd, kindly, penetrating eyes which saw through the surface down to the soul, and which had learned to look at life steadily and with a friendly smile.

Taska had introduced him the day he came. He liked the way he shook hands; and that afternoon during her rest-hour they had talked together, and he liked the way he talked. A country doctor, he had wondered what he

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thought of this last word in modern sanitariumism, but if impressed or appalled he gave no sign. Under the quiet poise and keen interest in all about him he had seen the whimsical twitch of his mouth, seen the shrewd eyes twinkle, and he had understood that nothing was being missed by them; but if conclusions were reached, he kept them to himself and made no comment.

To-night he had gone away with Taska, leaving a memory of something distinctive and individual, something clear-visioned and old-world, and yet full of understanding of the life of to-day; and he wished, as he had never wished to do anything before, that he, too, could have gone with him.

Of his people at Piping Forest he had spoken readily. He could only take in a few at the time, and they were an oddly assorted group. One or two city men, wrecked by the weight of their accumulations, three or four worn-out women, and as many mountaineers as the cottages could hold composed his family. Taska had been to Piping Forest frequently, but never as a patient. She had ever been a borrowed daughter, and he had come to take her home.

Unfolding the letter, Colburn held it to the light. The writing was the fine, old-fashioned

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kind that was the style of his grandfather's day. It made him think, though why he did not know, of shoe-buckles and brocaded vests, of knee-breeches and of ruffled shirts. The Doctor himself had made him think of such things, and yet his coat was worn and shabby, and his cravat, a plain white string, was crooked and carelessly tied. He opened the letter. There was no formal beginning, and as he read it seemed but the continuation of a conversation held the night before.

I will try and arrange for you to come, Mr. Colburn. Just now there is no room. But should Mr. Whyte or Mr. Wiley leave, your application will be considered next. I don't usually take people so well as you seem to be, but Taska tells me you are to be married, and she insists that I must try and get you well that the marriage be not delayed. I do not believe you need fear a long delay. When the way is open I will write you.

Sincerely,

EDUARD GRANNERE.

Slowly Colburn folded the letter, put it in its envelope, and the envelope in his pocket, then got up, and, as his habit when restless, began to walk backward and forward the length of the room. He had an uncontrollable impulse to laugh out loud, but the laugh would have been more bitter than a cry. Miss Laird insisted

## ADMISSION AND ADVICE

that he be made well that his marriage be not delayed. She had interceded for him in order that he might marry another woman. He would not marry another woman. Such a marriage would not be marriage. He would tell Isabel the truth.

Would he? He stopped his walk and stared out of the window at the shadows on the snow cast by the bare branches of the trees. No. He could not tell her the truth. Happiness or honor admitted of no toss-up. Back of him were men and women who could yield one, but not live without the other; and, though silence was neither just nor fair, the code forbade a man telling the woman to whom he was engaged that he loved another. At the code, so called, he had sometimes snapped his fingers, but he could not snap them now. He could tell Isabel that marriage was a remote possibility, again could offer to release her; but he could not go to Piping Forest until the engagement was broken by her.

For some moments he walked up and down the room, making strong effort to keep back the surging impulse to break from the barriers of custom and convention and make a man's fight for the joy and gladness of life, for the love of a woman who had made him know what life



## THE HOUSE OF HAPPINESS

might mean; but after a while he came back to his chair, sat down in it close to the table, and drew toward him paper and pen and ink and began to write.

When his letter was finished he sealed, stamped, and addressed it; then, with hands clasped between his knees, he repeated to himself the words just written. Had he been honest? It was the supreme thing he required of himself and others, but to be honest meant to be brutal. No, he had hardly been honest. He was sorry for Isabel. Her disappointment at his refusal to buy the Colesworth house at its advanced price had been distinct and unconcealed, but if she were marrying a house he was not the sort of man to go with it, and it was well that she should know it, and at once.

Lifting his head, he took out the letter of Dr. Grannere and read it again. The night before he had asked if he, too, might come to Piping Forest he had slept but little. His desire to go was overmastering; but was it right, was it wise, was it honorable? In the gray dawn of the morning, when truth is clearest and verities are stripped of sham and subterfuge, he had known he should not go, and before the day was done he had asked boldly if he might.

A knock at his cottage door startled him.



## ADMISSION AND ADVICE

Going into the hall, he hesitated, hand on the knob. He could talk to no one to-night. "Who is it?" he asked, and his voice was not warm in welcome. "Who is it?"

"Let me in!" A foot outside stamped impatiently. "I'm made of flesh and blood, if you are not. Do you think it's warm out here?"

The door was opened, and Mr. McKenzie, fur capped and coated, came inside, hands deep in his pockets, and in his face pinched with pain was pitiful appeal.

"Couldn't stand it by myself, Colburn. Had to come over. Got a drink of any kind anywhere around?"

Colburn shook his head. "Sorry," he said, and pulled out a chair for his shivering guest. "Never keep anything of the sort. I'll get some to-morrow."

"Damn to-morrow. I want it now!"

Two shriveled little hands held the back of the chair with a nervous grip. "She—she's gone, Colburn."

"Yes, I know. I went to the station to see her off."

"You did!" Something of the old snap was in the thin, sharp voice, then the fur cap was thrown on the table and the fur coat opened at the throat. "What did you do that for?"

## THE HOUSE OF HAPPINESS

"Because I wanted to."

"No reason at all. You had better not have gone."

For a moment there was silence; then Mr. McKenzie sat down in the chair near the table, but his eyes were fastened on Colburn, and in them was sudden, solemn fear.

"Don't," he said—"don't ever try to see her again. I tell you, man, you are not made to love or suffer lightly. She will never marry. No woman should in whom there is a hint of ill health, and she means what she says. Put her out of your life. Listen!" He leaned forward. "I loved her mother, and she loved another man, and I have lived, as I shall die, in loneliness that could not compromise. Forget her! Forget her, man!"

For a while the little clock on the mantel alone broke the silence of the room; then Colburn held out his hand.

"You have remembered because forgetting was beyond your power. It is also beyond mine!"

He turned away and pulled down the shade at the window across the room, and again the ticking of the clock alone broke its stillness.

## XIII

### PIPING FOREST

“A PERSON who doesn't get thrilly when it snows must be—”

“A coalless, woodless, bloodless person! Good many of each kind in the world. Looks as if we were in for the real thing this time.”

“I hope we are. I mean I would hope it if it weren't for those Haskins children.”

Standing near the edge of the little plateau on top of the mountain, Taska Laird stooped down and, molding a handful of snow, with a swift movement sent it down the valley toward a cabin buried in a clump of trees.

“They ought to be called ‘The Sifters,’ for helping them is about as satisfactory as trying to fill a sieve with water. In their system of life the head has no part. Look at that stove-pipe sticking between those two logs! Why didn't they cut a hole instead of pushing it out that way? Some people are hopeless. You

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can't do anything with them, and it's no use trying.

“Beat it with clay and clap it with mud,  
And you'll carry your water safe away.’

“Did you ever hear the story of Ruffie's sifter, and of the little bird that told her how water could be kept in it? It's the one the children love best.”

Into the face stung into rich color by the biting wind Dr. Grannere's eyes looked whimsically, and then he nodded toward the cabin down in the woods.

“Nobody is hopeless, child. Some just take longer than others, and different treatments must be tried. Behind those Sifters are centuries of ignorance and shiftlessness and isolation, and no standards of life save the primitive ones of their own making. It isn't just that class that have the holes and cracks in their characters. We all have them, and the job of mending is no jollier for us than for the others. Did I tell you Mr. Whyte is going to build a library next to the school-house? Build, furnish, and fill it with books.”

“No!” Taska turned, and in her voice was amazement and incredulous delight. “I don't believe it!”

## PIPING FOREST

"He is. Told me so to-day."

"And I've been thinking him a stingy old thing ever since I got here. Stingy as—"

"He is stingy." Dr. Grannere's merry little eyes gleamed gaily. "When he first came, taking his teeth out one by one wouldn't have hurt so much as parting with his money, but he's got infected! He is going away next week to get plans and make arrangements. It's a health germ that landed this time."

"And Mr. Colburn?" Taska looked across the gap and up at the leaden sky, and the fast-falling snowflakes for a moment paled the glow of her perfect skin. "Is he coming to take his place?"

"Colburn?" Dr. Grannere looked puzzled. "Oh, that young fellow at Baywood. I did promise him I'd write when there was a vacancy; but he wouldn't stay at a place of this kind. He's suppressed energy and action, and the mountain-top would not be to his taste. He is meant for a big city where his organizing powers could find employment. I liked him, but for the moment I'd forgotten his name."

Taska made no comment, and presently she turned around. "I think we'd better go in. You've been out for hours. Are you sure your shoes are not damp?"

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"Quite sure—that is, I don't think they are. Look behind you, Taska! They're all at work, the genii and fairies and magicians and wizards, and they're working well to-night. Piping Forest is the castle and we are—"

"The court." Taska laughed and drew in her breath. It was magnificent. Valley and ridge and spur and peak were wrapped in down too dear for royal robes, and trees and shrubs bent low in brilliant, dazzling decorations. In the distance, serene and stately, the big house and the little cottages seemed made of marble, and over earth and sky and in the air soft silence brooded.

By her side the master of it all stood silhouetted against the flake-filled grayness of approaching night, and in his soft hat and old-fashioned cloak, which fell in full folds from his shoulders, he was so fittingly a part of it that as she watched him a restless wonder filled her heart.

How had he reached them, won them, earned them, this peace and patience and cheery interest that was his? And why couldn't they be hers? Keep herself as active as she would, she could not keep back what she had once believed was settled safely and forever. Here in this quiet, secluded place the surge of life was calling

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as it had never called before, and of late she found herself resisting the acceptances that had been won after battles sharp and hard. Did he ever want to go again into the world and do a man's part, as she wanted to go and do a woman's? Not now, perhaps, but had he ever wanted to go since first he came? Out in the big world was so much to do, so much to delight in. Had he ever wished to enter it again?

There was cause for his changing sharply and suddenly the course of his life. From the stir and movement and gaiety of great cities to the stillness, the slowness, the dullness of a home on the mountain-top he must have come with a burden which could not be borne in the presence of others, and here he had found peace, and found it at no sacrifice of spirit, no surrender to mere ease and idleness. What was that cause?

She wanted peace, but she wanted much besides. In the end, after the certain sorrows and uncertain joys of life, it might be enough, but it was not yet enough. She wanted—

“The court must hurry!” Dr. Grannere's voice recalled her from the forbidden outreach of her thoughts. “I was wondering what might happen if another idea should get into Mr. Whyte's heart. It was his heart, you



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know, the idea got in. You can't do much with a head after it's sixty in the way of new ideas. His little case of breakdown and his big one of Ego-itis had made him forget he had a heart. He hates theories, but he likes to see things work, and he is getting interested. He is lonely and selfish, and never guessed it." He turned to the girl beside him. "What's the matter, child? You're a thousand miles away!"

"Am I?" Taska slipped her hand through the Doctor's arm, and quickened her steps as best she could in the heavy snow. "I'm a very rude person. I didn't mean to be so far away, and I'm glad Mr. Whyte is getting human. Maybe if he sees how well the boys are doing he'll help with Practice House. Minerva Haskins made the bread yesterday for lunch, and you could eat it."

"Beat it with clay!" The Doctor's hand patted the one on his arm, and his eyes turned to the face by his side.

"About Mr. Colburn," he said, "do you think he'd better come?"

"If you promised him."

"I promised at your request. You told me he disliked Baywood even more than you did, and that he was to be made well were it in my power to make. I don't know whether it is or not.



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I've never examined him. But he isn't going to be married. I remember now he wrote me some weeks ago, shortly after you came, I think. He still wanted very much to come, but said I must understand his marriage was not to be a factor that might make for sympathy. His engagement was broken. His desire was to get well, to try our system. Take care, child! Under the snow are many stumps that trip. If I had not partially promised I do not think I'd let him come."

"Why not?" Taska's eyes were looking straight ahead. "You said he was a man of force, of ability, the kind of man the world needs if he were properly directed. Isn't he as well worth saving as one of these mountaineers?"

"When did I say that?" The eyes that saw things were turned upon the girl by his side, and over the top of his glasses he looked at her, first quizzically and then with questioning. "When did I say that, child?"

"On the train the night we left Baywood?"

"Did I?"

For a moment only the crunching of their footsteps on the fine crust forming on the snow

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broke the silence; then the Doctor took off his glasses.

"I remember I was impressed with the man. He seemed the sort you could put your hand on, and when you turned your back you need not fear. A selfish man, I imagine, not yet interested in much outside his own affairs, and ambitious—too ambitious, I'm afraid. I've been so busy of late that I had forgotten him. I owe him something for that. Must I let him come?"

"Did you ever go back on your word?"

"I said I would consider his application next. I doubt if he is seriously sick. There are many waiting who apparently need to come far more than he."

Taska drew her hand from the Doctor's arm and, stooping, picked up her muff, which had fallen at her feet. Ahead of them through the windows of the big house the dancing firelight could be seen in some rooms, and in others the glow of lamps that burned with steady flame. From the pillared veranda a lean and clean-limbed hound, hearing them, bounded forward with eager, joyous leaps.

At the steps he turned to her again.

"Shall I let him come, Taska?"

Hands on the dog's head, she smoothed it

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with friendly fingers. "It is your house, dear Doctor-man. You must not ask me who your guests shall be!" Then she raised her eyes and looked into his. "Were it my house I would let him come."

## XIV

### NEW QUARTERS

HE glanced around the large square room with its four big windows, its old-fashioned furnishings, its blazing logs upon the hearth, then went over to the capacious mahogany wardrobe, opened it, and looked inside.

Dominicker, one of the negro boys on the place, had been sent up in the afternoon to help him unpack and put away his clothes. In the midst of this Colburn had been called down to Dr. Grannere's office, leaving to Dominicker's arrangement the contents of trunk and bags and box of books; and it was well, perhaps, to take a glance around and see if said contents were properly in place.

At Baywood one dressed for dinner as one did at the large and showy hotels filled with the visitors from small cities and towns who were intent on demonstrating their familiarity with the usages of polite society; but at Piping Forest it would not be required, and with strong satis-

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faction the two evening suits were put on back hooks and out of the way.

Closing the door, he came back to the fire and drew his chair close to it. Away from it the room was very cold. His bed—he turned and looked behind him.

“A house in itself,” he said, half aloud, and was glad to see there were no frills on its four carved posts, and glad also that its covering was turned down and a step was at its side. “It’s worse than was Grandmother Ludwell’s! I prefer the new kind, but any kind will be good for sleep to-night.”

Slipping down farther in his chair that his back might be protected from draughts that came he knew not where, he put his hands in his pockets to keep them warm, his feet on the fender to get them hot, and for some time gazed in the dancing, curling flames.

He was strangely tired. For days he had been tired. The night he had received Dr. Grannere’s letter he had slept but little, and in the early morning he had got up and gone out and tried to face fairly the situation in which he found himself. He was no longer engaged to Isabel McLean. Her letter in answer to his, written the night Taska left Baywood, had been characteristic. In his heart was no

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criticism of her, however. He had been no less guilty than she in forgetting there is but one basis of happiness where marriage is concerned, and both were fortunate in escaping a relationship which could promise little but danger and disaster. Doubtless she was as relieved as he.

Bending forward, he lifted a fallen log on the andirons and threw on top of it a fresh one from the box at his side, and again, with narrowed eyes, watched the flames catch and curl.

He had not answered Dr. Grannere's letter at once. For two days he struggled with the desire to go and the fear of putting himself where resistance to telling Taska of his love might be impossible, and then he wrote Dr. Grannere he would come. The next morning he went to see Cricket.

In the blazing logs the boy's face came to him as he saw it in the dining-room of the Baywood hotel, where he had taken him for lunch in order to tell him of his going. And there he first asked him how he would like to go away to school, go where he could prepare himself for college, if later he should want to go to college.

"Go away to school?" Cricket's eyes popped, and the spoonful of ice-cream was suspended

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on its way to his mouth. "Get on a railroad train and go away to school and stop milking? Me—you mean me?"

"I mean you." Colburn buttered a bit of cracker carefully. "I know a pretty good preparatory school for boys, and if—"

The spoon splashed in the plate of cream, and Cricket rose from his chair and flung wide his arms.

"I told Teenie some day I'd get away and not live all my life in a tombstone place! And I can get to be somebody if I go to school, if I haven't got any blood kin, can't I?" He stopped. "Does Miss Taska know?"

"No, but I think she will be glad to know. I've heard her say you'd make a man of yourself if you had a chance."

"Did she say that?" Cricket's arms swung up in the air. "And me with something you can't tame in my mouth!"

Colburn looked up. "Something what?"

"Something you can't tame." Cricket's tongue was projected to its fullest length. "Mis' Lemmon read it to me out of the Bible the other night after she'd made me wash my mouth with kerosene oil and brown soap. She made me learn the words by heart. St. James wrote 'em. These are them: 'The tongue no

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man can tame.' I won't go till you go, will I, Mr. Colburn?"

"You ought to get in as soon as possible. I could take you with me, I suppose. I am going away myself to-morrow."

Cricket sat down as if shot from the back. "Going—away—to-morrow!" His hands fell limply on the table. "Going away to—"

"Morrow. Yes." Colburn spoke gaily. "Mrs. Lemmon will have to hurry." He stopped. Cricket's face was hidden in his hands.

For a moment there was silence. Joy had been swallowed in dismay. At first thought school had meant fixed nearness to his unashamedly adored friend, and now to have him leave without warning was too sudden a change from sweet to bitter to be taken unmoved. Presently he looked up, and then away.

"Are you going to—her, Mr. Colburn?"

The glass of water in Colburn's hand was put down untouched, and in his face color crept to the temples.

"I am going to Piping Forest, where she is," he said. "The Doctor there, Miss Laird thinks, is the best in the country for Tubers. There will be things to talk about before I leave. Come up this afternoon about five. If Mrs.



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Lemmon can't get you ready I might meet you later and take you on." He pushed back his chair. "I don't want to hurry you, old man, but—"

"I'm through." The unfinished cream was looked at with indecision, then Cricket rose, and together they went out into the keen and cutting air.

That afternoon Cricket appeared on time, and, standing in the middle of the room, he twirled his cap nervously on the end of his finger, then dropped it on the floor. In his eyes was something that made Colburn understand even before he spoke, and he turned away lest he give sign of seeing what he knew he must not see.

"I come to tell you I can't go, Mr. Colburn." Hands were clasped behind, and fingers dug nervously into the palms. "I'm awful much obliged to you and I won't forget, but I can't go. 'Tain't Mis' Lemmon. It's Teenie. She ain't got anybody but me to tell her things, and to see things for her, and to read to her, and hold her up when the breath won't come. She ain't got any own mother and father. Mis' Lemmon's her step-mother, and she don't understand, not having any of her own but just two husbands, and I'm all she's got to keep her spirits up."

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“You mean—you’re going to stay in Baywood? Mean you’re not—”

“I don’t know what I mean. I ain’t slept a wink for thinking about it, and I want to go so bad I ain’t got any sense. But I can’t leave her all alone by herself. I can’t, Mr. Colburn! Mis’ Lemmon does a lot for her—clothes, and food, and fixings, and all that—but she wouldn’t have anybody to wait for if I go, and she can hear me whistling long before anybody else can hear. I haven’t told her. She’d say I must go, because I’m going to live and she ain’t—she’s been awful bad off lately—but I can’t go. I’d be wondering if she needed me, and nobody’d read to her when she can’t sleep, and I couldn’t sleep myself. And you know I thank you, don’t you, Mr. Colburn? You know I want—”

Under the table Cricket disappeared, control no longer being possible, and not for some time could Colburn disentangle the huddled little heap which fought valiantly to keep back that of which it was ashamed. But when, an hour later, he walked to the gate of the sanitarium with him nature had partly asserted itself, and their good night had something of its usual cheer. Taking an envelope out of his pocket, Colburn slipped it into Cricket’s.

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“When you get home put that away, old man.” His hand for a moment was laid lightly on the boy’s shoulder. “Some time you may find use for it; and remember you’re to write to me. You have my address all right?”

“I have it.” Cricket’s voice was again uncertain. From under the red curly hair the big blue eyes looked into the gray ones of his friend.

“It hurt worser ’n—worserer than I thought anything could hurt when she went, Mr. Colburn, but ain’t nothing ever hurt like this.”

Such a little while ago that had been, but such a long while ago it seemed to-night!

Yesterday the shabbiness and untidiness, the few lounging white men, adepts in spitting tobacco juice, and the lazy, good-natured negroes at the little station of the little Virginia town, where connection was to be made with the branch road which would take him to the junction where Dr. Grannere had met him, were in marked contrast to the cleanliness and orderliness of the small New England stations just left; and with something of irritation he had walked up and down the platform, with its broken planks and accumulated ash piles, and wondered why such things should be.

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At the junction the Doctor's simple, kindly, gracious greeting had driven out all other thought, however; and when in the old-fashioned sleigh he had been tucked in comfortably and they had started on the seven-mile drive, over winding roads that were rough and uncertain, to Piping Forest on the mountain-top, he wondered if he were himself, were the man who had hated the stillness and smallness of Baywood. Baywood was big and busy to this—and it was to this he had gladly, eagerly, impatiently come. He turned to the man at his side.

"You are good to take me in, Doctor. I am very grateful. I need not tell you, perhaps, but—"

"Grateful?" The kindly, cheery little eyes under the white brows looked into those of the younger man. "I'm glad to have you, my son, and when you are a strong, well man again we will all be grateful. And that's what we're to do. We're to get you strong and well."

The logs no longer blazed. Deep in their center glowed rich and red their heart of oak, and, leaning forward, Colburn gazed steadily into it.

"Strong and well!" His face fell in his hands. For her sake he would dare, endure, surrender whatever love required, if only in return her love be given.

## XV

### A TWILIGHT TALK

**S**TAMPING the snow from her shoes, Taska Laird held out first one foot and then the other to the young darky standing on the porch.

"Take off my rubbers, Dominicker, and put them near the stove in the hall. You'd better let him do the same with yours, Mr. Colburn."

Colburn laughed. "I don't think he could get mine off. Are you going in the library? If so, I will bring you the book of which we've been speaking."

"I will be in the library about half past five. It's four now, isn't it?"

Colburn took out his watch. "Four-fifteen."

"Then it will be five-fifteen before I come down, possibly six." She smiled and without turning in his direction went into the big hall with its beautiful stairway, and up the bare steps to her room, and in the latter she closed the door and locked it.

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Slipping out of the fur coat, she laid it on the back of a chair and, changing her dress and shoes for kimono and slippers, drew the couch to the open fire and curled up on it. For an hour she must lie down, and then she would dress for the evening. She wasn't tired, although since their early dinner she had been tramping with Mr. Colburn up and down the mountain to the school-house, to the boys' farm, to the girls' Practice House, and to the homes of two or three of the Doctor's mountaineer patients; and at the memory of his expression when the first house was visited she laughed half aloud.

"So many worlds, so many people, and he knows so little, so very little of them."

Hands under her cheek, she looked at the curling flames, and her eyes grew grave. "It is the trouble with all of us. We know so little of one another's world!"

The past week had been one of strange exhilarations. Mr. Whyte's departure to see about the log building which was to be a room of books wherein the people of the Red Gum district could come and read, and from which they could take books away into their homes, had caused a degree of excitement out of proportion to its importance, perhaps. But the

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establishment of a library—at the word she smiled—had long been a dream, not only of herself and the Doctor, but of the worked-to-death little minister and his more worked-to-death and cheerful little wife, and, now it was coming true, they were so very happy. It was nice to be happy.

Out in the big world, the world she had lived in when with her sister, she wondered if they knew what real things they could do with it—those people with their much money, which they spent so lavishly on people who spent lavishly in return. If they just knew— She changed her position and looked at the wall opposite with its faded paper of shepherds and shepherdesses encircled in a wreath of roses, and slowly her eyes closed.

She wondered what the Doctor thought of Mr. Colburn's case. It was impossible to think him a sick man. About him was no suggestion of ill health, and with him a sense of security, of ability to accomplish his purpose that strength ever radiates, and she did not believe it likely he would have to stay long. She hoped not. Of course she hoped not, only—

She had shown him the one store at the station where was post-office and telegraph-



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office as well; shown him the school-house in which Miss Finney was doing a hero's work without a hero's recognition and reward; the little church and the small cabins of their mountain friends; told him who each of the patients was, with a little something of their stories, and gone with him to barn and stable, and sheepfold and workshop, and negro quarters and apple orchards—to, indeed, all that made their little world at Piping Forest; and now there was nothing more that she could do.

The firelight danced upon the rug about her feet, and drowsiness crept over her. He would have to go away if he did not like their little world. It was a quiet, busy, happy world, not a big one such as he was used to, where big things could be done. She hoped he would not go away. It would be very lonely if—He could go anywhere he chose . . . She—was—going—to—sleep.

Down in the library Colburn waited, and, waiting, walked from deep-silled, damask-curtained windows to book-filled sides of the room; and from the wide, old-fashioned desk, with books behind its diamond panes, to the carved center-table of richly colored mahogany, and at the latter he stopped and glanced at



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the many magazines and new books piled upon it.

"Out of the world he may be, but of its thought and work he knows far more than I, far more than any man I know." The opening of the door behind made him turn. Going to the fireplace, he pulled forward a deep, low chair.

"I've been waiting for you half an hour," he said. "Were you very tired?"

"Not tired at all, but I've been asleep."

With slippered foot on the low fender she drew her skirt of pale-yellow stuff slightly aside, and in the firelight the whiteness of her throat showed clearly, for the dress was open at the neck, and on her black hair, parted and brushed back, the flicker of the flames seemed soft kisses that came and went from unseen lips. She looked around.

"I wonder why Dominicker doesn't light the lamps!"

"He came in to light them. I sent him out. The firelight is much nicer—that is, if you don't mind."

Settling herself in the chair, she leaned back in it and put her feet on a crewel-worked cushion of ancient pattern. "No, I don't mind. When I was a child the twilight hour was the

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happy hour. It was father's hour for telling us stories. Nowadays fathers have so little to do with their children. I don't believe the new fathers know any stories, and they're too tired to tell them if they knew. Everybody is so busy. We didn't use to be."

Colburn drew his chair a bit farther from the fire, and his gray eyes smiled into hers.

"Were they so much better—those days that are no more?"

"Sometimes I think they were. We had more time for certain things we have no time for now; but then again I'm sure this is the wonderful age of human history."

She laughed and, drawing the tall screen closer, lowered its framed square of embroidered peacock, and adjusted it to the angle that would keep the flame from her face. "I'm glad I've had a chance at life in it. It is the woman's age—the age in which she has waked up. Wasn't it queer she should have slept contentedly so long?"

"Contentedly? I imagine she has not been content for some time, but to open her eyes to what she was not supposed to see required courage for which she had no training. No bondage is so hard to break as heritage and custom."

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“And we *must* open our eyes! It is so hard to make those who do not want to see, who will not see, understand. Half the trouble in the world is because we do not try to understand.”

“The woman who doesn’t want to, won’t.” Colburn’s eyes were still watching the flushed and eager face. “If she doesn’t wish to know a thing, see a thing, believe a thing, for her it does not exist, and for you it must not. When she does she will go to her death if necessary to give proof of her belief. Yours is indeed the half of humanity which keeps the other half guessing.”

She laughed. “I thought you were going to say swearing. We are the real intolerants of life. Individualism has been our school, and we’ve so long seen darkly through the glass of things that now the chance has come to see clearly we are afraid to look. And, most of all, women are afraid of one another. No really sensible woman denies that women are queer!”

Laughing, she slipped out of her chair and, sitting on the crewel-worked footstool, held out her hands to the blaze.

“It’s dreadfully cold in here! I like all the room to be warm. I want the open fire, want it for cheer and comfort and company, and because I’m used to it and love it, but I know

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it is not enough. Like a great many things of yesterday, it is not enough to-day."

The door opened, and Dominicker's head was thrust inside.

"Mis' Bagley say is you all comin' to supper? The bell done rung three times, and she say the chicken won't be fitten to eat if you all don't come 'long. There's waffles to-night; you'd better hurry!"

## XVI

### SUPPER-TIME

AT the head of the wide mahogany table, polished to a degree of brightness and beauty that compensated somewhat for its loose legs and the big dent near its foot, Mrs. Bagley beamed upon her family of oddly assorted members, and behind the coffee-urn and teapot radiated a stream of cheer that reached to every seat. Mrs. Bagley was good to look upon, for she was happy; and for happiness give me sunshine, she would say, and a thankful appetite that says grace before it eats.

“Do have a little more tea, Mr. Wiley! Just a half-cup? Don’t you believe it”—her hand was waved dissentingly—“don’t you believe all this nonsense about dieting! Half the people in this world are starving and don’t know it. How can an engine run without fuel? But of course it must have the right kind of fuel. Why *don’t* Dominicker bring in more waffles? Mrs. Elder is waiting for waffles, Bradford.”

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She nodded to the gray-haired darky who, in a coat of ancient cut, was holding a plate of hot rolls behind Dr. Grannere's back, waiting for that gentleman to finish carving a few more slices of ham. "Put down the rolls and go see about the waffles, Bradford! I'm afraid I'll have to get you to speak to Dominicker, Eduard. He says he was born on the fourth quarter of the moon, and certainly at times he isn't all right in his head. He's been so queer of late I thought he was courting, but Cicely says he's seeking. He may take two weeks to come through, and Bradford can't do more than he's doing. Sometimes they don't come through for a month!"

"Oh, he's nearly through!"

On the end of the carving-fork Dr. Grannere held a very thin slice of ham, and turned to the man at his side:

"This is our own curing, Mr. Colburn. Let me give you a bit of it. Those waffles are on the way, and you'll need something to go with them. Mr. Colburn will have coffee, Jane."

"I've had two pieces of ham," Colburn hesitated. "I didn't know it was possible to eat what I have eaten to-night, and I must have some of those peach preserves."

## SUPPER-TIME

"That you must!" Mrs. Bagley beamed again in the direction of the foot of the table. "I made them, and there's nothing pleases me so much as to have people eat the things I make. And peach preserves are so healthy! Miss Neilson, won't you pass Mr. Colburn's cup? Bradford may be spanking Dominicker—he's his youngest, you know, and Bradford can't realize he's grown up, which isn't a wonder. And then, too, Bradford isn't a church-member, and hasn't any opinion of these revivals which are going on. They always come in February, just as the big meetings come in August, and I suppose, poor creatures, they must have some recreation and enjoyment. But I do wish they'd bring those waffles! Taska, dear, would you mind giving Dr. Walters some batter-bread? He's very fond of batter-bread."

For half an hour longer the talk flowed cheerily; and, glancing around the table, Colburn wondered if it were not some serio-comic mistake that this was a place to which sick people came. With the exception of Mrs. Bagley and Dr. Grannere, each seat at the table was filled by a seeker of health, for even the young assistant, Dr. Walters, and the nurse, Miss Neilson, were subjects of science, as Harnish called them, and with all present was

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still the insecurity that attends the uncertainty of trouble not yet entirely arrested.

No consciousness of insecurity was evident, however; and Colburn, who was a close observer, had wondered at the absence of unrest and nervous strain which had been characteristic of many of the patients at Baywood. There, in addition to the cure and treatment, nothing was left undone that might divert and entertain. At times he had resented the amusements provided, protested inwardly at their being treated as children before whom bells must be jangled that they might forget the cause of their fret and pain. In miniature it was the world's method of pushing behind the web of make-believe the actualities that must be met, and beneath it had been hollowness and discontent, for each had known the still watches of the night were waiting for their time.

He wondered if with each one around the table there had been the same quiet hours with the Doctor as had been his since he had come a week ago to Piping Forest. Perhaps, if so, that accounted for the atmosphere in which they found themselves. After several physical examinations which had been the most exhaustive and minute to which the human body could seemingly be subjected he had received a report



## SUPPER-TIME

that for the moment had gone to his head and made the blood beat in thick surges through his brain; and still he was told he was not, and for some while yet would not be, entirely well and strong.

"Nature is slow and patient, but she does her part with half a chance, my son." And the kindly, keen, intelligent eyes of the old Doctor had held his own. "She allows nothing for ignorance, and punishes indifference and disregard. We say at times she is kind, and at others she is cruel, but always she is working. For some months there must be built up what has been broken down. The little life-giving fighters must be made strong enough, and many enough, to eat up the death-dealing ones, and to do that there must be help on your part as well as mine. The man who does his part has nothing to fear. In life there is no place for fear."

Was that the secret of the serenity that gave so singular a sense of security to his presence? He was a good fighter. He made use of good weapons. Little that science could provide, little the inventive genius of man had devised for the diagnosing and cure of bodily ills had he not investigated, and, what was needful, secured, and he doubted if in any part of the world more intelligent care was given to each

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individual case than was given to the patients of Piping Forest, though penniless and obscure were all save a few.

Up to this time there had been no chance for talk on matters other than that for which he had come primarily, and not until he had asked for a private conversation had he been able to get the hour which to-night was to be his. As they rose from the table Dr. Grannere turned to him.

"Ten minutes and I will be with you, Mr. Colburn. There is a girl in the Clematis Cottage I must see first. She was brought in to-day. You are tired, Taska." He lifted her hand to his cheek and held it there a moment. "Go to bed, child. Jane, Dr. Morley will be here to breakfast. He is very fond of crackling bread and—"

"Pork sausage and buckwheat cakes and roe herring and beaten biscuits. I know!" Mrs. Bagley brushed the crumbs from the lap of her well-worn black silk skirt and got up also.

"Dr. Morley is the kind of man I like. He comes from Maine or New Hampshire or some of those places where they have pie and dough-nuts for breakfast and indigestion for the rest of the day, but when he comes here he eats anything that's put before him, and always takes

## SUPPER-TIME

a second helping." And with a nod that was beamingly inclusive she went through the doorway into the long hall that opened on the yard where was the kitchen, but little less than half a square away.

In the long, low wing adjoining the house were the Doctor's private rooms, and as Colburn entered the study he had the sensation of entering a place in which is found a new sense of values, a new understanding of the essentials of life, and he no longer greatly dreaded that which he had expected very much to dread.

He was not given to expression of personal feeling. His was not the nature to lay bare its most sensitive emotions, and nothing save a sense of honor could have drawn from his lips what as yet was the secret of his heart. It would not be easy for him to speak. Words would not come readily, but they must come. In an issue such as this form must yield to frankness, and its sacredness would save from the smallness of shrinking.

Concerning his own condition, he no longer felt either great depression or fluctuating fear. He believed he was going to get well. Hundreds of people had got well, had married, and in their marriage committed no sin and

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transmitted no suffering, and for himself he was unafraid. But for her. Would he have to be afraid for her?

For the first time the money he had made seemed a precious possession, and, getting up, he began to walk up and down the length of the long, low room with its frayed carpet and shabby chairs. At the death of his mother it had mocked him with its helplessness to heal the deeper hurts of life, but now it would be the means by which might be secured those aids so necessary in cases such as Taska's; and if she would marry him nothing in human power would be left undone that held out hope for health and strength and normal life again.

If only he could go back to work and make more money! He would want much, need much. A sudden thrill of desire to get again in his hands the management of certain matters possessed him restlessly, and, taking a letter from his pocket, he looked at its date.

Shortly after he had written Ralstone to call off further negotiations for the Colesworth house the latter had left for a hurried trip to Europe. The letter in his hand told of his return, and also that he would write at length a little later concerning one or two matters that needed some explanation. During his absence

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his head clerk, to whom he had given certain powers to be exercised in case of need, had exceeded those powers, and in consequence there were some small complications that needed straightening.

Glancing over the letter, he frowned perplexedly. He had fully intended to withdraw from Ralstone the power of attorney left with him, but, not wishing to do so when writing of the house matter, he put it off for a few days, and in the mean time received the note telling of the business trip abroad. He must write him to-morrow.

The stamping of a foot outside the door made him pause in his walk, and a moment later Dr. Grannere came in.

"Snowing again," he said. "We must see about the birds to-morrow. This has been a bad winter, but a bad winter means a good spring. Punch the fire, Mr. Colburn, while I get a pipe made from a bit of a Piping Forest tree. I don't smoke, myself, but I enjoy seeing others smoke, and for many years old Joshua Crane has whittled pipes for the friends who come and go. Morley sends the tobacco. What *did* Dominicker do with that box of pipes! Ah, here it is, and here's the tobacco! Draw up your chair, my son. This is a good night for a talk."

## XVII

### CONFESSIONS

COLBURN did not draw up his chair. Nor did he fill the quaintly carved pipe the Doctor handed him. Instead he looked at it for half a moment, then laid it on the mantelshelf and leaned against the latter, hands in his pockets.

"I have asked you to let me talk to you to-night," he began, his voice quiet, but a bit unsteady, "because I want to tell you I love Taska Laird. Until you assured me the chances were all in my favor for getting well I could not tell you—or her—and yet I wanted you to know before I came. Had your verdict been different I should have gone away, and not even to her would I have told what I am telling you now. But I am going to get well, and I am going to marry her if she will marry me, even if she—"

He stopped and, taking out his handkerchief, wiped his forehead. His face was white, but

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in his eyes and the sudden setting of his lips was something to be reckoned with, and for a moment the Doctor said nothing.

If at the first words he had given a start of surprise there was no second indication. Too long had he been schooled to unexpected revelations of life to be taken greatly unawares, and after the first moment he leaned back in his low chair, and, with elbow on the table, shaded his eyes from the light of its lamp, and watched the face, fine and earnest, that was looking into his, and then he spoke.

“Even if she—”

“Is never to be well.”

The words came indistinctly, then Colburn straightened. “Unless you tell me marriage will absolutely endanger her life I am going to try to make her marry me. It is this that I am asking you to do. To tell me what her chances are for health that—”

“Justifies marriage?”

“No.”

Hands in his pockets, Colburn began to walk up and down the room. “I once was as severe and exacting as the coldest of scientists regarding the justification of marriage, but that was before I understood its supreme requirement. I have not told her of my love. I could not



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until I knew I would not be a burden, a care, an anxiety, should she in time love me in return. But I am here to-night to ask your consent to win her. If you do not give it I must go away. With her alone is to rest the decision concerning marriage."

"And if for her marriage would be sin?"

Colburn stopped. "God, man! Do you think I would let it be a sin?"

With a swift movement of his hand as if to wave back what was not in thought to be imagined Colburn continued his walk a moment longer; then he came to the table and, drawing up a chair, sat down in it opposite the Doctor.

"Tell me," he said. "Is she going to get well?"

Carefully the wick of the lamp was lowered, and, moving his chair closer to the fire, Dr. Grannere leaned forward and broke into brilliant blaze a large lump of coal.

"She is," he said, quietly, "but you will get well first. Her strength is by no means equal to her will. For years she may need—"

"What I can give her. I've had to make the same fight she has. I can understand, and care and protect her as could no one who has not had my experience." Colburn's voice was low and eager. "Have I your consent to marry her if she will marry me?"



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The Doctor looked up. Over his beautiful face, into which life's denials had never brought embitterment, varying emotions for a moment swept rapidly; then he held out his hand.

"You certainly have not, my son." He smiled whimsically, then gravely. "Taska must not marry yet. Moreover, though I think I know a man when I have lived in the house with him some while, I don't know him well enough to let him marry my child. I know very little of you, Mr. Colburn. Why should I give my consent to your marrying Taska even were she strong and well?"

Into Colburn's face sprang flame, then something in the Doctor's checked the hot words on his lips, and a sudden sense of comedy came over him. That he, Rives Colburn, whose name among his people was his passport, and who had been for some time considered a most eligible possibility among the matrimonially desirous in his community, and, to a certain extent, out of it, to be told to his face that he was unknown was an experience a bit humorous as well as uncomfortable. Then the color in his face cooled, and the frown faded.

"If you were doubtful of me you should not have taken me in your home," he said, and his

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voice made effort to be steady. "If credentials are necessary—"

"No. Credentials are not necessary. I took you in my home as a patient, not as a suitor for Taska's hand." The Doctor's was laid on Colburn's. "I like you, my son, but that does not mean I am as yet willing to consent to Taska's marrying you. How do I know you would be the husband she should have? So far your own interests and affairs have come first in your life. Taska's ideals of marriage are very high, and she could never be happy, as an adjunct of life. They tell me I am out of date and old-fashioned, and that people do not love in these practical days as they loved in the days of romance—the days that are said to be dead. I do not believe it. Love may be blighted, may wither and waste, but it does not die. When love is dead, so, too, is life. It is the same to-day as it was yesterday, if its roots be in the soil that nourishes. How do I know the nature of your love? I do not doubt its very real existence, but its wearing quality. Of that how can I tell? Were you not engaged some weeks ago to some one else?"

"I was."

Colburn's face flushed, but his eyes looked steadily into those looking into his. "Some

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weeks ago the lady to whom I was engaged broke the engagement. When I asked her to marry me I wanted a home. She answered every visible requirement of the home she also wanted. She wanted money, and all that money means, and, though I am not wealthy in the modern sense, I could supply most of her desires, and we became engaged. As clearly as you I see the sin of it now, but I did not see it then. There are many who do not see it still. Perhaps I should not have done so had not—love shown me.”

With a sudden movement Colburn put his arms on the table and leaned toward the Doctor.

“I have read all sorts of philosophies and theories concerning the relation of men and women to one another, all sorts of dreamings and demands of mystics and free-thinkers, all sorts of old and new ideas regarding morals and marriage, and I thought I had my own. But when Taska came into my life I was conscious of what before was unawakened, conscious—”

“And Taska?” The Doctor, too, leaned forward. “Does Taska love you?”

Colburn’s head went up and his eyes faced those looking into his, but his hands shook slightly.

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"No," he said. "I do not think she loves me yet. I have said no word, but restraint is no longer possible. Great God! Has there never been love in your heart for a woman that you can understand?"

The Doctor's hand went out as if to ward off a blow, and his face grew gray and withered. Seeing it, Colburn stopped, his own face whitening. "I beg your pardon," he said. "I seem to be saying all that's wrong to-night."

The tick of the clock and the crackle of the coals alone answered him, but half a moment later the Doctor made effort to smile, and, getting up, held out his hand.

"Good night, my son. You have given me much to think of, but I cannot think clearly just now. You must come again. You will not tell Taska until we talk this over some other time? I can trust you? You will not tell her of your love? She is in my care, and her happiness as well as health is in my keeping. I must think—" He steadied himself with his hand on the table. "It has been long since I have talked of love and marriage. Some things we think are dead are not dead. Come to-morrow night. No, not to-morrow. I am going away in the morning for a couple of days with Dr. Morley. This is Tuesday. Come

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Friday night and talk with me again. And don't think—don't think I do not understand!"

For a moment he hesitated, his eyes searching with wistful appeal the face before him, then with swift decision he laid his hand on Colburn's arm.

"Come with me," he said. "Save Jane's, no eyes at Piping Forest, not even Taska's, have seen what I shall show you. You will not speak of this, but when you see you then will know how well—I understand!"

Leading the way, he opened the door into the room adjoining; and, following, Colburn saw him light two tall candles on either end of the mantelpiece, and saw also he was in a bedroom. It was low-pitched and oblong, and its furnishings as bare as a sybarite's, but over the mantel was a large picture, heavily framed and covered with a curtain of wine-colored cloth. As Colburn drew closer the Doctor lighted a third candle and held it high in his left hand, while with his right he pulled slowly a cord of faded gold.

"Nearly forty years ago I learned how—to understand," he said, and in the shadowy flickering light a face of exquisite loveliness looked down upon them. On the parted lips a smile alluring and yet of proud reserve hung as if uncertain whether to grow warm and sweet or

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cold and bitter, and in the brilliant black eyes were depths so baffling that Colburn could understand the madness that might seize a man who was lured by them to-day and found in them but disdain to-morrow. With a swift turn of his head he looked at the man beside him.

Forty years ago! The flame of love still flung its fire, and in the gentle face was youth's upleaping, then it faded and left it white and worn.

Twisting the cord around a hook in the wall, the curtain was kept drawn as usual for the night, and on Colburn's arm the old Doctor again laid his hand.

"It is because I understand so well, my son, that I would have no man, no woman, do the wrong I did. I let ambition in my life come first. A few days before Diane and I were to be married I—" He stopped. "I cannot talk of it to-night. Some other time perhaps." He put his hand on the door-frame of his bedroom. "On Friday come again; and no word to Taska. Not even of the picture. You will remember?"

Colburn turned quickly, but the frown caused by the question, which was unnecessary, faded, and his hand was outheld.

"I will remember," he said; and, turning, he

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went out of the door and across the snow-covered lawn to his room in the big house, and late into the night before his fire he wondered concerning that which he had seen, concerning that which he was to hear, and most of all of the days that were ahead.

## XVIII

### WORRIES AND WORRYING

BUTTONING his coat as he came down the steps, Colburn, looking neither to the right nor left, walked down the box-bordered path and through the gate to the private road belonging to Piping Forest. Reaching the public road at whose fork one turned to the south if the station and its one store were to be reached, and to the north if the little settlement was the destination in view, he hesitated half a minute and then entered a by-path which led to a cabin some two miles away.

The station was seven miles distant, and, though a sort of savage energy could take him there, it could not bring him back, and, moreover, the station and its lounging occupants did not appeal. Nor did the settlement. Nothing appealed. A good long tramp was what he needed, and to get it he had started early and alone.

During the Doctor's absence he had seen



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Taska but once. Save at his meals he had seen little of any one. The writing of many letters had claimed his time, and, besides, he was in no mood to talk. Something of the old rebellion, the old restlessness, was upon him, and a consuming desire to go back to his work, to take again in his hands the management of matters that needed him, possessed him to a degree that tested his strongest powers of restraint, and only by great effort was he decently polite to his fellow-residents on the mountain-top.

For two days a cold had kept Taska in her room, but beyond a formal inquiry of Mrs. Bagley or Miss Neilson he could learn nothing of her real condition, and unreasoning fear had filled him lest their long walks had been unwise, and he the cause of her overtaxing her strength. A thousand foolish, fearsome questions had tormented him; and the house no longer being endurable, he had hurried out of it, and not until within sight of the cabin of Mr. Solomon Hatch did he realize he had been walking as if pursued. At the realization he slowed down.

Why he had come in this direction he hardly knew. The road was rough and narrow, but occasionally through the gaunt, bare trees vistas of alluring beauty could be glimpsed, and at one point was a site that Taska had told him

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she wished was hers. Were it hers she would build a cabin on it and spend her summers there, she said. He wondered if it were for sale.

As he reached it he stopped. Across the Gap peaks of the Blue Ridge undulated in rhythmic fashion, and on their crest patches of snow, which caught the sunlight and gave back rainbow gleamings, stood out clearly against the wooded mountain-sides, while from the valley, as soft as shadows of the day that dies, the mist was rising, white and gray.

As alone as if he were earth's only occupant, he breathed deeply of the clear, pine-scented air and felt the subtle stirrings of awakening nature, watched the soft haze of the sky's pale blue and amethyst fade in the golden glow of the absorbing sun, then turned away and continued his walk.

It was very wonderful, very beautiful, but he preferred a street full of people. He looked ahead at the little cabin on the mountain-side a quarter of a mile distant. He would pay its occupants a visit. Mr. and Mrs. Solomon Hatch were a type unknown before coming to Piping Forest, and their points of view were entertaining. They took life at its face value, asked no questions, offered no explanations, and made no pretense of understanding its

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problems or perplexities. And still their principal occupation was conversation. There was no time of day or night they were not ready to talk, and if an audience of one or more were not at hand the pig or the dog, the cow or the cat would answer their purpose. They preferred people, but early in life they had learned to accept the limitations of their environment.

When he reached the cabin Mrs. Solomon Hatch opened the door cautiously. Seeing the visitor, she stretched it wide.

"I thought 'twas Solomon," she said, "and I didn't see no wood. I ain't a-goin' to let him in lessen he's got the wood. Come in and set yourself down, Mr. Piper. I can't right this minute hitch your name to your face, but I know you come from up there"—her hand was waved indefinitely into space—"and the Doctor's friends is always welcome. I never was good on names, but Piper people can come in here, goin' down or comin' up, and rest their legs whenever they feel like it, and if that good-for-nothin' what's mine ain't around I enjoys seein' of 'em. But when he is I might as well be dead or dust for all the chance I get to say anything. Last time you come Miss Taska was with you. How's she feelin' to-day?"

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Colburn looked around for a place to put his hat, then laid it on his knee.

“Not very well, I believe. Has a pretty bad cold. Dr. Grannere is away, and Dr. Walters seemed a little worried yesterday. She is better to-day.”

“Co’se she is. And if anybody will tell me what good worryin’ does they can have every egg my hens is agoin’ to lay this spring! More folks wears out from worryin’ than dies from drink, and drink is the king-bee killer, Mr. Deyo says, and he ought to know, bein’ a preacher. I ain’t one of them what takes a preacher’s word as gospel, for I ain’t ever seen a male creature yet what warn’t just a man, and when you live with a Solomon Hatch your ideas of man ain’t much. But Mr. Deyo ain’t ever said nothin’ what didn’t prove itself in the seven years he’s been here; and if he says whiskey, corn or any other kind, is the root of all evil, which the Bible says is money, I’ll take his word for it, him livin’ now and knowin’ what he’s talkin’ about, and the gent’man who wrote that in the Bible bein’ dead some time. I’m sorry Miss Taska’s got a cold, but if they’ll give her hot molasses with turpentine in it every hour, and put a mutton-suet plaster on her chest, and bind some red peppers on the soles of her feet, she’ll

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be well 'fore come Sunday, sure's you're livin'. 'Tain't meant for folks like her to be sick. The world is a-needin' of 'em too bad. Seems like the triflin'est ones is the ones what lasts longest, though. A man what's got a complainin' wife has got her for life. You can't kill a complainer. Solomon's brother's got one like that. He thinks all the world of her, waits on her like she was a baby. I used to think she was a little fool critter, but it's me who's been the fool. A man don't think much of a woman he don't have to wait on. You don't look like you're married. Be you?"

Colburn, who had been looking around the room, shook his head. Built of logs whose chinks were filled in with mud, the walls had a corrugated effect that was fascinating, and an inclination to count them possessed him strongly. Splotches of color made by feminine garments and calico quilts, by strings of red peppers and ears of corn, by pails and pans, and pants of corduroy which hung suspended at irregular distances on their four sides, relieved their bareness most effectively, and, hardly hearing, he again nodded his head.

"What did you say?" His eyes came back from their survey of the stove, one leg of which was gone and its place taken by a stone of

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slightly greater height than the leg it replaced. "Am I married?" Again he shook his head. "No. I am not married."

Hands on her hips and the sun-bonnet, which hung ever on her back in winter and summer, forming a gray setting for the shrewd, seamed face, she looked at the man before her with sharp, keen eyes.

"Right good-lookin' critter not to been caught 'fore this. I ain't sayin' a little more flesh wouldn't help you, and you don't look like you've swung an axe as much as is good for you. But as men go, you ain't bad. If I'm any judge, you spend more time thinkin' how you'd like to run this universe than is healthy for you. You ain't a-goin' to run it, and if you're as smart as you look you'll spend your time doin' what you can do, if your mouth's any sign. I always did like a man with good teeth. Yours is as white and even as Miss Taska's. Now she's what I call sensible. Just to hear her laugh kinder clears up things. She's the onliest person I ever knew what could outtalk Solomon. Leastways, she's the onliest one he'll listen to."

Going over to the stove, Mrs. Hatch put in the last piece of wood in the box, then came back and, sitting down in the chair opposite



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Colburn, took from her pocket the sock she was knitting for her husband.

"If you can tell me how Solomon Hatch expects his dinner to get cooked without wood I'll be obliged," she said. "Solomon could tell. There ain't nothin' he couldn't explain if you'd let him. But I says to him this mornin', says I: 'Solomon, from this day on it's you brings in the wood or it's you what gets no dinner. I've come to my senses.' I come to 'em right often, but I don't stay in 'em as long as I ought.

"I tell you now, if I'd been a worryin' kind I'd been in my grave the first year I married Solomon Hatch. Soon as my girls could understand talk I tole 'em if an explainin' person ever court 'em to run as fast as their feet could fly. Solomon's an explainer. He ain't ever done a day's work, what's a man's work, since he was born in this world, but the man he was named for couldn't have give more better reasons why he didn't do it. I come from the other side the Gap, and I didn't know nothin' 'bout him 'cept his looks and his talk, and nobody on our side could touch him in them two things, which is always onreliable. I reckon you're goin' to get married some day, ain't you?"

"I certainly hope to." Colburn laughed and,

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pushing a flat-iron from the edge of the bare table, put his elbow on it. "Don't you approve of matrimony? You've had long experience."

"Long experience ain't always a safe recommendation. I been married thirty-nine years—come next November 'twill be forty—and I ain't testifyin' in favor of matrimony when the man is a Solomon Hatch. Never yet seen anythin' what could disturb him. He ain't got a wrinkle what's made by worry."

"But you said just now there was no need of worrying!"

Mrs. Hatch walked over to the bucket on the table near the stove, put in the dipper, and drank a good draught. Turning, she held the dipper toward her guest.

"I ax your pardon. Will you have a drink?"

"No, thank you." Colburn took out a cigar. "Would you mind if I smoke?"

"Would I mind if you smoke?" Hands on the top of an iron kettle from which was escaping the steam of a savory stew, the woman again turned, and in the sharp eyes was uncertainty and incredulity. "Would I mind? If I did, wouldn't you do it?"

"Of course not." The lighted match was held suspended. "Are you sure you don't object?"



## WORRIES AND WORRYING

Mrs. Hatch sat down, and her hands twisted under the check-ingham apron. "I been married nigh onto forty years, and I ain't been asked about objectin' before." Into the faded face faint color crept. "Lessen 'tis when he's eatin' or asleep, I ain't seen Solomon's mouth without a pipe in it since the day I come here to live. He sticks to his pipe like he turns his back on worryin'. When I says there ain't no good in worryin' I mean 'bout them things what 'tain't in folks' power to change. If we can change 'em we ought to do it, and if it's the Lord who's managin' we can leave it with Him, I reckon. But some worryin's is lawful. Them what don't do their share generally has somebody around who does it for 'em. That's Solomon. I ain't never heard tell that the Lord pays taxes, or cuts the firewood, or mends the roof when it leaks, or gets shoes for the children, and all them things has got to be done. Solomon Hatch leaves the things he don't like to do to the Lord. He gets me and the Lord mixed up."

The ball of yarn slipping from her lap, Colburn stooped, and, picking it up, handed it to her, and into her face again crept faint color.

"I ain't sayin' Solomon haven't got his good points. Some things he takes right sensible,"

## THE HOUSE OF HAPPINESS

she went on, after a fraction of a moment's silence. "When the seventh baby was born 'twas a girl, same as the other six, and we was awful set on a boy, but when a girl came Solomon said all the wishin' and the worryin' in the world wouldn't make her a boy, and he liked girls, anyhow. She died. Five out the nine died. The livin' ones is married, all 'cept Jim. He went away." Her voice trailed off into huskiness. "I don't reckon you ever come across Jim, did you?"

Colburn again shook his head and, turning his eyes away, watched the smoke from his cigar float up into the rafters which supported the roof of the cabin.

"No," he said, quietly. "I don't think I ever came across him."

Under the blue checked apron the work-worn hands again twisted in a knot. "He was always runnin' away when he warn't nothin' but a boy. He wanted to see everything and every place what was in the world, and when he was seventeen he went. At first he used to write, but he ain't writ for two years come next twenty-seventh of August. I—I know 'tain't no use in worryin'. It don't help, but somehow it don't seem like you can talk yourself out of it when somethin' is a-layin' right here what don't ever

## WORRIES AND WORRYING

go away." Her hand was laid for a moment on her breast. "Every night I gets up and sets by the window wonderin' 'bout Jim, and don't a day go by that I ain't a-lookin' 'tween sun-up and sundown over the Gap thinkin' maybe he might be comin' back. If you ever see him when you go away I wish you'd tell him no matter what he done I'm a—"

"I certainly will." Colburn got up. "He'll come back. Don't you worry." His voice was amazingly cheerful. "All of us tell one another not to worry, don't we? It's the other fellow's worry we're wise about. Good - by, Mrs. Hatch." He held out his hand. "If I see Mr. Hatch, shall I give him a message?"

In his shapely hand, with its long, firm fingers, the stained and knotted one of the mountain-woman was laid limply, then she withdrew it and pointed to the box at the stove.

"Tell him I say it's wood, or not a taste of rabbit do he get, not even gravy. Him what don't work ain't got no call to eat, the Scripture says, and it's as true now as when 'twas writ. And tell Miss Taska I hope she ain't a-goin' to be sure-enough sick." With a swift movement she laid her hand on his arm for half a moment. "And don't you worry, young man. She's a-goin' to get all right!"

## XIX

### IN THE FIRELIGHT

ON Friday night the Doctor had not returned. A note from him told Colburn he would be away for several days longer. Dr. Morley would come back with him, and during the latter's visit their talk would have to be delayed, but he must not think he had forgotten.

It was like him to write, and like him to make no further request concerning Taska. Through the latter he learned something of the nature of his mission with Dr. Morley, and through her learned also that a day or two had been spent in his own city.

The days of his absence passed slowly. The weather was bad, the March winds disagreeable, and walking at times impossible on account of wind and rain, and to kill time would have been difficult had not Taska, now well again, suggested he give part of it to the cottage patients. At first he had hesitated. By nature he was

## IN THE FIRELIGHT

not qualified to cheer the sick, or so he had imagined, and when she asked him to go with her to see a half-blind boy at the Blue-Bell cottage who was compelled to be continually in bed he had at first declined. At the look in her face of amazement his own had flushed and he had laughed slightly.

“You think I am selfish, think I shrink from disagreeable things, think—”

“I certainly do!” Her voice was indignant. “I think you think a good deal too much about your own feelings. If you don’t want to do a thing, that seems sufficient reason for not doing it! Suppose you were ill and half blind and had none of your own people near you, and you loved to read and couldn’t read, and the days were long and lonely and—”

“I’ll go! Don’t rub it in.” His voice made effort to be light, and failed. “Since my— Since I once saw great suffering, saw death, I have shrunk from pain in others as the veriest coward shrinks, but I admit the selfishness and weakness. Does the chap like books?”

Each day he had read to the boy, talked long with him, heard his story and that of several other patients, and by degrees his horror of contact with sickness in any form wore slightly away. But not entirely without struggle could

## THE HOUSE OF HAPPINESS

he go from Woodbine to Clematis, from Blue-Bell to Laurel, as the cottages were called, and had it not been for Taska there would have been times when he might not have gone at all.

Very busy were these days with her. There was much in which she could help Mrs. Bagley and Miss Neilson, and, though he saw her frequently, he rarely saw her alone.

After the Doctor's return, and while his guest was still with him, there had been several visits with Taska to the primitive homes of certain of her mountaineer friends; and during these walks she had talked much of her work in the past, her eagerness to get back to it, her desire to be again in the city, be strong and well that she might do her part, and, most of all, to use the opportunity her position on the paper gave her to write about those things in which she was interested. And to it all he had listened in a silence she may have noticed or may not have noticed.

To talk impersonally was difficult. Directness was instinct and intention. That which he wanted supremely he made effort to get, and to be bound to silence was well-nigh beyond endurance. Until the Doctor had talked with him as he had promised, told him that which he

## IN THE FIRELIGHT

was to tell, he could say nothing. He would not wait indefinitely, however.

On the day of Dr. Morley's leaving, which was the end of Colburn's third week at Piping Forest, the latter's arm was touched as he rose from the dinner-table.

"Come to my study to-night, Mr. Colburn." The Doctor's voice was low. "Come about nine."

To the minute Colburn was at the study door. To the "Come in" he opened it and entered. The fire was blazing cheerily, but the lamp on the table was turned down, and only the dancing firelight broke the darkness and made it possible to see across the room.

In his low leather chair the Doctor was sitting, and close to him, on a square mahogany stool upholstered in faded tapestry worked by fingers long since dead, was Taska, one hand on the arm of the Doctor's chair, her chin in the palm of the other, while her elbow rested on her knee and her eyes looked in the curling, leaping flames.

"Come in, my son." The Doctor made effort to rise, but Taska, who had turned, held him back.

"Don't," she said. "You are tired. Mr. Colburn can find a chair."



## THE HOUSE OF HAPPINESS

At his entrance Colburn had seen her start slightly. He was glad the shadow shielded him, for he, too, had drawn back in surprise. Evidently his coming was as unexpected to her as her presence was to him.

Putting his coat and hat on a chair near the door, he drew up the one opposite Taska. "I am not interrupting, I hope?" Hand on the chair, he hesitated.

"You're not interrupting." Taska nodded to him to sit down. "He was just telling me some of the things he's been seeing lately." She turned to the Doctor. "Did you hear any new stories this time? Any of those queer, strange stories you're always coming across?"

"Two new ones." The hand holding his was patted, and the Doctor smiled. "Every life has its story—yours, mine, Mr. Colburn's here, every one you know. The strangest are those found in unexpected places."

Taska looked into the leaping flames. "These new ones—are they stories you can tell?"

With a movement of his hand the Doctor turned out the remaining bit of light in the lamp, but not before Colburn had caught a swift glance that seemed a signal. So quickly did it pass he was not certain it was sent, and yet it seemed meant for decision, outreach,



## IN THE FIRELIGHT

surrender, and, moving his chair slightly back in the shadow and closer to the table, he shaded his eyes from the firelight, and wished he could hold his heart with his other hand, that its sudden throbbing might grow less.

Was he going to tell before Taska the story he had come to hear? For a moment he wished he had not come. To lay bare hidden hurt, to revive old memories, was to give him what was not deserved. He made a movement as if to rise; but the Doctor's hand was raised, and in his eyes was something not to be ignored.

"These new stories? No, I cannot tell them, but I can tell you an old story. I think I will tell you my story. It is not long. What is it—What is the matter, Taska?"

"I—" Her face was crimson, and with an unconscious movement her hand went to her throat. Getting up, she looked around, then slipped down on the footstool, her fingers interlocked. "I don't know," she said. "I thought perhaps you were too tired. Wouldn't you rather tell it some other night?"

"No. I would rather tell it to-night."

With a smile her hand was laid for a moment on his cheek, and when he spoke his voice was very gentle.

"Sometimes one likes to dwell on the days we

## THE HOUSE OF HAPPINESS

think are dead. As we grow older they come back again, and it is well to go over them every now and then; well to walk among their memories, and talk of what made them sorrowful or glad. Mine was a gay youth. There is little of life I have not tasted, but I will not tell of that. I shall only tell you why I did not marry Diane d'Estrées."

## XX

### THE STORY OF DIANE

THE room grew still. In the grate the flames had ceased their leaping and the coals were red with steady glow. Colburn had said no word, but his eyes were on Taska's, whose for a swift moment had been caught and held, and to them he had sent a message that had kept her silent, kept her indeed from again raising them to his.

"I was twenty-seven when I met the only woman I have ever loved." The Doctor's voice was quiet and even. "Her name was Diane d'Estrées, and she lived with her parents at the chateau in Normandie which had been occupied by her family for many generations. It was a very shabby chateau. Their fortune, like that of many other *émigrés*, had never been recovered after the upheaval by which they had lost it; and when I met them they were poor, a fact of which they seemed unconscious, and to which by others reference was never made.

## THE HOUSE OF HAPPINESS

“My grandfather had lived, before coming to America, but a short distance from the Château Lamboïse, and it was when making a pilgrimage to his birthplace that I met Diane. The house in which he was born had been burned many years before, and no longer did any of the family live in the neighborhood, but at the little inn in the village of Lamboïse I found comfortable quarters, and so interesting did the place prove I decided to spend my holiday there rather than go on into Touraine, as I had first planned to do.

“In the village and adjoining country I found some white-haired, bent-bodied peasants who remembered my grandfather and his brothers, they having once worked at their place, and from them I learned that Madame d'Estrées was the daughter of my great-uncle, Victor Grannere, and therefore the cousin of my father. I had seen her pass in her carriage, a very shaky affair, with a couple of horses as ancient, seemingly, as the cockaded individual who sat on its box, but I did not like her looks and felt no desire to make her acquaintance. Our lives were very far apart, our worlds of very different kind, and in a few days, or weeks at most, I would go away. I did not want to be bothered. I wanted my time entirely at

## THE STORY OF DIANE

my own disposal, wanted to wander at will along the banks of the Seine, on the perfect roads, and in the by-paths which led to quaint and surprising places, and so I made no effort to meet this cousin of my father. I never thought of her as being relative of mine. Though I heard there was a daughter, I did not see her, and in happy idling the first week of my holiday passed quickly.

“Daily I would take my lunch in front of Gaspard’s rose-covered little inn, where I could watch the village people come and go, catch bits of their talk, and listen to their comments; and there at night, after a good dinner and a good bottle of wine, I would talk with Gaspard over my cigar and hear from him tales of romance and adventure that were more amazing than Dumas or Balzac had yet given to the world.

“I had finished the medical course I had come to take in Paris. Two years had been spent there and in Vienna, where special laboratory work had been done, and in September I was going back for one more year in Paris before returning to America. I was very comfortable and care-free. With a little economy my income was sufficient for my needs, for, though I loved life, its follies never specially appealed, and the

## THE HOUSE OF HAPPINESS

lack of great wealth had never worried me. The future was but the chance in which to do things. Of these things the chief was some day to be at the head of my profession, to be an authority to which the medical world would listen.

“It was on the third day before I was to leave Lamboise, a perfect day of late June—the twenty-ninth it was—that I met Diane. I was coming back from a long tramp in the woods, and half a mile from the village I saw a horse with a side-saddle on it grazing along the road. It struck me as queer, but, seeing no one, I was about to pass on when I looked again, and sitting under a tree, one foot outstretched and one drawn up in her lap, was the loveliest and angriest creature I have ever seen.

“‘Are you deaf or blind that you do not hear or see?’ she said, and had she been standing her foot would have been stamped. ‘For an hour, an eternity, I have been here, and not a soul has passed. My horse has thrown me and I cannot walk!’

“I went to her. Throwing my hat on the ground, I knelt beside her on the grass.

“‘Which foot is it?’ I said. ‘Where is the pain?’

“‘Everywhere. I must get home.’

## THE STORY OF DIANE

"Her hand was on the ankle of her right foot, and, pushing it aside, I began to unbutton the high riding-boot. The ankle was greatly swollen and the pain must have been intense, but, save by the whiteness of her face, she gave no sign, and for a half-moment amazement kept her dumb. As I pulled off the boot, however, she leaned forward and, taking up her riding-whip, struck me across the face.

"How dare you!" she said, and tried to get up.

"I pushed her back. 'Behave yourself!' I said. 'I am a doctor!' And in anger as great as hers I threw the whip across the road.

"She had never been so spoken to before. Later I found how it must have amazed her, how my taking off her boot must have amazed her. She said nothing more, and after binding the ankle as best I could with my handkerchief I found the horse, took her in my arms and put her in the saddle, then, leading him by the bridle, got her to her home, but a short distance away."

In both of his the Doctor was now holding Taska's hand. Her heart was beating in thick, quick throbs, and her breath came unsteadily. Why was he telling this to-night? Why, after all these years of silence, was he telling—

## THE HOUSE OF HAPPINESS

"I did not go back to Paris." The quiet voice again took up its story. "The sprain was not a bad one, but the village doctor was away, and Madame d'Estrées insisted upon my attending her daughter. Naturally, our relationship was discovered, and a thousand questions had to be asked and answered. For two months I did not live on earth. For two months I saw Diane daily, and were there to be no heaven when this life is done I still should know what heaven is.

"I was as new a type to Diane as she to me, and we cared not who knew that we had found each other. At first her parents did not realize to what our friendship was leading and, when I asked her father for her he was excited and uneasy and weakly protested, but it was the mother who was violent in opposition. They were poor. Diane was expected to marry a fortune and restore the ancient chateau to its former glory, and I—I was nothing but a young physician with fame as yet unearned and with an income but little more than enough for my own needs.

"I was asked out of the house, ordered out of it. Though they were afraid of Diane, though they knew how imperious was her will, how unbridled her temper, how determined her in-



## THE STORY OF DIANE

tentions, they were more afraid of a future in which there was no money, and Diane was told she was to marry the man who for some time had been waiting to marry her, and I was forbidden to see or speak with her again. Diane laughed at them, defied them, and told them she would marry me or marry not at all.

“For days we would meet and wander down the long, straight, tree-lined road, in the forest by-paths, or on the banks of the Seine, where we would watch the boats on their way to or from Havre or Rouen, but I never went again to the house of Madame and Monsieur d’Estrées. I was an American, and my blood was as hot as theirs was calculating, and Diane understood. We were too happy to care greatly for anything save each other. In Diane were such varying personalities that I was in continual bewilderment, and life was joy so rich and great and mysterious that we thought only of the day before us and left to-morrow for itself.

“As fall came on, however, I knew I must go back to work. Diane was told. My little money was understood, as was my much love, but she was willing to marry me, go with me into the life that must be quiet and simple, and we agreed to be married by a priest in the next village, leave at once for Paris, and then send

## THE HOUSE OF HAPPINESS

word to her parents. About her was always something of defiance, of daring, and readily she fell in with the plans suggested. From the day of her birth her will had never been crossed, her wishes disregarded, and she would brook no interference now. Her beauty was so blinding, her brain so quick and clever, that all the ambitions of the French mother's heart had been centered in a brilliant match for her, and that she should love me was as unbelievable as it was enraging, and for the first time Diane met opposition to her will."

Changing his position slightly, the Doctor leaned back in his chair. In his cheeks two spots of color burned deeply, and in his eyes was the light of youth. Watching, Colburn felt that he and Taska were forgotten, and in reality, as in spirit, the lover was with his love again. In his own face the color crept and stayed.

"Youth has its pride as well as age, however." In the quiet voice was something now of weariness. "I wanted to give Diane a name that stood for something, a name known in the world of science and medicine, wanted to take her to a home which should be a proper setting for her brilliance and beauty, and for days I struggled with my desire to marry her at once

## THE STORY OF DIANE

or go back to my work and win the position to which she was entitled. I could win it. The power was in me, but it meant to wait, and I did not want to wait.

"A week after agreeing on the date of our marriage I received a letter from the professor with whom I had done my best work offering me a position as his assistant that would give me opportunities I had not dared to hope for. But it would mean that I must live with him for some months, give to him my entire time, and receive in return much more experience than money. If I accepted, marriage for the time being was out of the question.

"I did not tell Diane of this offer. My professional future was in the balance, and to turn the offer down was to trifle with the chance of a lifetime. I wrote I would accept, and then told Diane."

The Doctor's hand went to his head, and his hair was brushed back absently, and for a moment the silence was unbroken; then again he spoke.

"Diane, proud and imperious, ready to surrender, willing to yield her life to mine, giving the love withheld from all others without reserve to me, was told, it matters not with how much suffering, that marriage must wait upon

## THE HOUSE OF HAPPINESS

professional ambition, and that I must leave in a few days. She saw my pain, knew it, but as if some secret spring had been touched, blaze sprang in her eyes and the haughtiness of her race to her lips, and she bade me go at once, bade me leave her without delay. I— It is not necessary to tell of the days that followed. Later I learned much I did not then know of the heritage that was behind her, a heritage to be reckoned with.

“She would not let me see her again. My letters were returned. Pride was her imperial weakness, and she scorned my efforts to explain. I said just now that I have lived in heaven. I have. But I have also lived in hell. A week after I went to Paris I saw in the papers that she had married Count L’Anneville, a man of corrupt character, considerable wealth, and but little younger than her father.”

In the grate the coals were turning gray. Leaning forward, the Doctor looked for a moment at their ashes, then he got up.

“Her picture is in the other room. Would you like to see it, Taska? Mr. Colburn, take her in and show it to her while I fix the fire. When you come back it will be bright and warm again.”

## XXI

### THE STORY CONTINUED

OPENING the door, Colburn stood with his hand on the knob and waited for Taska to pass inside. As she did so he followed and closed the door behind him.

On the mantel the two tall candles were already lighted, and the wine-colored curtain, drawn from the painting, was held back by its cord. Taking up the small candle from the table as he had seen the Doctor do, Colburn lighted it and held it aloft.

"This way," he said. "You can see it best from here."

As if afraid, Taska drew nearer. She felt herself intrusive, felt she was seeing something she should not see, hearing faint echoes that should not be heard; and in her hands holding rose leaves and mignonette, faded and fragrant, which belonged to some one else, and she was frightened.

Save from the light of the candles the room

## THE HOUSE OF HAPPINESS

was dark, and also it was cold. Watching, Colburn saw her shiver.

"Quick!" he said, and his voice was imperative. "You must not stay in here. It is very beautiful, but—"

Instead of looking at the picture she looked at him, then drew back, and her hands went to her breast. He would remember. He could speak no word, but he was mortal, and in his eyes was message that surged and swept and drew her to him; and he, too, forgot what they had come to see.

For a moment she shrank, then she looked in the face above hers, and in her own was flood of crimson.

"You—you have seen it before?"

"I have seen it before."

In silence, broken only by the sputtering of the draught-blown candles, they looked upon the picture; then Taska turned to him.

"Why is he telling this to-night? It is not right that we should hear. It breaks one's heart to know what he has suffered. I can't—can't understand!"

"I think—I understand."

Colburn's voice made effort to be steady, but it was not steady. The hands before him were trembling, and he could not take them in his

## THE STORY CONTINUED

own. He blew out the candle he was holding, put it down, and again his eyes searched hers, appealed, asserted, and absorbed.

"Are you sure you do not understand—Taska?"

At her name she drew back. "Why should I understand?" she said, and her face whitened. "We must not stay. We must go to him."

The fire was blazing cheerily. The crackling coals flared and blew out flames of gold and red and purple glow; and, sitting down, Taska and Colburn waited, and then Taska spoke.

"It is very beautiful." Her hands held the Doctor's tightly. "I do not wonder that you—"

"No one would wonder had they known her. It was her beauty alone; brilliance and much besides were equally her birthright. Had her mind not been of so keen and sensitive a quality it might perhaps—"

"For me there was but one chance in life, and that lay in work. By day and night I kept at it until I would fall asleep at my desk or on my feet in the laboratory. The brain and nervous system were my specialties, and as assistant to a surgeon who had been a pupil of the great Broca I had opportunities that could come to me in no other way. The influence of Hetzig, Ferrier, Luciani, Charcot, and others was



## THE HOUSE OF HAPPINESS

strongly affecting the medical world of which Paris for some time had been the center, and the lecture-rooms at that time were crowded with students from all countries. I had expected to give my life to the study of the brain, but the passion with which I now gave my entire time to it was only to keep from thinking of other things. There was no longer interest. I had no feeling for it. I alone had wrecked my life. I alone was to blame for what had happened. Diane was as unlike the average woman in temperament and mentality as in physical beauty, and I had dared to dally with a love that on my knees I should have daily thanked my God for having granted me. In the rebound of pride at what she believed was the putting of my profession before her she had married the man her parents wished. In something less than a year after she married she became insane."

In his low chair the Doctor leaned back, and presently the quiet tones again took up the tale.

"Late one night, shortly after I had learned of what had happened, I was reading in my room when I heard a noise behind me. Turning, I saw Diane. Though excited, she seemed rational and told me how, with the aid of a

## THE STORY CONTINUED

bribed nurse, she had managed to escape from the institution in which her husband had placed her, told me also she would never go back, begged me to kill her first. As she spoke of the past she suddenly became mad again, and for hours I fought with her. In the morning she was quiet, but—

“The trouble was hereditary. On her father’s side there had been a good deal of it. It would probably never have developed had—had her life been different. From the first I knew there was no cure.

“Some distance from the city was a little cottage with trees and a garden, and I put her in it with the best nurse to be found, and took a couple of rooms for myself in the village near by. Her husband, hearing she had escaped from the asylum, made no inquiry concerning her, and a few months later died. Her parents came to see her but once—the effect was harmful, and to repeat it unwise. For eighteen years she lived there. When she died I left France and came to Piping Forest. Your father bought the place for me, Taska. He knew what I wanted. I have been very happy here.”

A coal dropped on the hearth, and, leaning forward, Taska brushed it under the grate.

“And she—was she—”

## THE HOUSE OF HAPPINESS

"Yes." The Doctor held tightly the hand she slipped into his. "She sang a good deal. Part of each day I spent with her, and she understood the rest of the time must be for work. For a while there were bad days, cruel, bitter days, but gradually the brain-cells that control memory, control many things, gave way, and she became quiet and quite happy. In the first few years there were fleeting moments of time in which she knew, as I knew all the time, that the chance of living in the only house that can give happiness had been ours and we had lost it. It mattered not that, unknowing, we had done this. Love alone gives light to life, and I had failed to follow where it led, followed, instead, ambition, as she had yielded to high and outraged pride. Taska, child, your hands are very cold! Why, Taska, you are crying!"

"I'm not crying!" Taska got up. "I'm not crying, but— Oh, Doctor-man! Doctor-man!"

Drawing her to him, he lifted her face and looked into the eyes which fell before his, touched her hair lightly with his lips, then held her off.

"Good night, child! I've tired you with my story. Forget it. Mr. Colburn and I will talk a little longer. He has not smoked a pipe from Piping Forest yet." He turned his head. "Is that some one knocking?"

## THE STORY CONTINUED

For a moment each listened; then, as the knock was sturdily repeated, Colburn, in answer to a nod from the Doctor, crossed the room and opened the door.

A blast of cold air and darkness was at first all that was felt and seen, and then a boy sprang inside. His cheeks were bitten by the wind, and his hands, red and chapped, twisted his cap excitedly, and in the firelight they saw Cricket.

“It’s me, Mr. Colburn,” he said. “It’s me! Teenie is— Teenie don’t need me any more, and I’ve come!”

## XXII

### THE ARRIVAL

FOR half an hour there was confusion of tongues. Cricket's surprising appearance gave opportunity for an expression of feeling that could have no other outlet, and with arms around him Taska held him close.

"Cricket," she said, "oh, Cricket, I did not know how much I loved you! How much I wanted you! I'm so glad you've come!"

"So'm I."

Cricket pulled and rubbed his fingers, too cold and hurting to be yet held to the fire, and looked first at one and then the other. "But you ain't got roads what's golden streets in this part of the world! You ought to heard Mr. Pepper-pot swear! I'm a baby in long clothes to him." A string was pulled from around his neck and held up. "Ain't a knot in it, but if 'twas Mr. Pepper-pot's—"

"Mr. who?"

The Doctor, who had given warm welcome

## THE ARRIVAL

to the little stranger, and, in the first amazed greetings of Colburn and Taska, had stood aside, leaned forward. "Mr. who?"

"Mr. Pepper-pot. He's in there." Cricket's hand was waved behind him. "Him and I come together. Is this"—his eyes roamed around the big, cheery, shabby room of books and firelight, and came back to his friends—"is this where you all live now, Miss Taska?"

But Taska did not answer. "Pepper-pot?" she said. "Pepper-pot here? Please hurry, doctor-man! They must be starving. I can't take it in!"

"I ain't starvin', exactly, but I could take anything in." Cricket blew on his fingers. "He warn't feelin' religious when I left him, and I reckon you'd better get him something hot; he was 'most frozen."

Colburn's hand went out to the boy's shoulder. So far there had been only exclamations of surprise and astonishment, of welcome and amazed questioning as to when he had left Baywood, how he had come, how he had made the seven-mile drive from the little station to the mountain-top; and for the first time Colburn noticed that the boy's lips were blue and his hands trembling.

"We'd better go over to the house and get them something to eat," he said, and turned to

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the Doctor. "Do you suppose Mrs. Bagley is up?"

"Sure of it. Jane never goes to bed as long as she can hold her eyes open. Taska, you will want to see your old friend, but don't stay up late to-night. We will look after him, and to-morrow you can talk all day."

"But where are you going to put him? There isn't a spot—Mrs. Bagley told me so yesterday."

"Oh yes, there is." For a swift moment the Doctor hesitated. The one luxury he allowed himself was the privacy of night when the day's work was done, and its surrender meant much. "We can take care of him." He nodded toward his door. "There's a little room adjoining mine; he can use that to-night. To-morrow we will make him more comfortable."

"To-morrow mine can be fixed for him." Taska looked up. "Mr. Wiley goes in a day or two, and then I can have his. Oh, Cricket! It's like spring-time to have you here—have you with us again!"

A few minutes later they stood before the blazing fire Mrs. Bagley was chunking as vigorously as she was talking energetically, and, huddled in a shrunken heap before it, hands outstretched, was Mr. McKenzie. In his voice



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and eyes were the snap and fire of other days, however, and at Taska's joyous greeting and the hearty handshakes of the men he sniffed scornfully.

"Born a fool and a fool I'll die when it comes to doing certain things," he said, and his fingers were waved stiffly. "Couldn't stand that durned place any longer, and when the boy said he was coming, I came, too. Had to see you, Taska." His hand went out to the girl beside him, and in her warm ones she held it close. "But get rid of your vain pride and glory in being a Virginian. Your state has given great men to the country, but this part of it has the rottenest roads on earth! We were nearly three hours driving here from the station, suh! Nearly three hours; and when we get here no mention made of a hot toddy!"

The Doctor laughed. His fine, keen face, with its quiet and intellectual quality, was in such contrast to the querulous, clever, imperious one of the little South-Carolinian that Colburn, watching, hardly noticed the words of the latter until the Doctor spoke; then he, too, smiled.

"The toddy is being made, Mr. McKenzie. Jane still makes them occasionally, but we'll get you warm in a wiser way in a few minutes."

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"Don't like wise ways; and don't get off modern nonsense, my dear suh! I prefer experience to theory, and, moreover, science admits the effect and influence of imagination. For certain purposes the Bible commends a little wine. Taska, child, are you glad to see me?"

On her knees beside him Taska took the shriveled, finely formed fingers in her warm young hands and rubbed them into life again. They had never done a day's work, never been soiled from exercise more strenuous than that of the pen, but they had never held back help that could be given, or dealt a blow in the dark, and as she rubbed them she laughed.

"I'm so glad I'd like to cry!" Her eyes filled, but they were strangely happy. "To have you and Cricket drop down from the sky is so exciting I haven't any sense. And it isn't going to hurt you—the tiresome trip and the long ride and all the other things. You'll be all right to-morrow. It will be warm and lovely and—"

"Nasty month, March! Don't like it; never did. Treacherous! And I hate wind. Ah, here's the thing that looks Virginian!"

The little man rose; and as Mrs. Bagley, beaming as cheerily as the toddy was steaming

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warmly, held the tall, thin glass toward him on a silver tray of old-fashioned pattern he bowed gallantly, first at her and then at the others.

"A man under fifty I never ask to drink." He waved his hand in Colburn's direction. "I hope your theories will keep you warm, suh!" At the Doctor he bowed again. "It touches the spot, madam! I'm all spot to-night, and that boy there is all emptiness. He hasn't tasted food since one o'clock."

With a cry of pitying horror Mrs. Bagley gathered him to her, and a few minutes later all were in the dining-room and Cricket was devouring food too eagerly to talk. But after a while many questions were asked and answered, many inquiries made of Baywood friends and Baywood happenings, and then Mrs. Bagley, who had slipped away with one of the maids, after a few words with the Doctor, came back and announced that Mr. McKenzie's room was ready, and that for Cricket a cot had been placed in Mr. Colburn's room for the night. Ten minutes later Colburn and Cricket were upstairs together, and for the first time they gave good greeting to each other, for the first time were free to speak without restraint.

Piling the wood on the fire until it roared and crackled, Colburn drew two chairs up to it, and

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for the clothes and shoes which were travel-worn and muddy he got out a woollen bathrobe and a pair of slippers; and when the warm bath, ordered by the Doctor for Cricket, was over he was bundled in his new possessions and told to put his feet on the fender and let it out—that which he must let out before sleep could come.

In delicious warmth and comfort Cricket curled up in his chair and looked at his friend, but before he spoke of his own affairs he asked of his.

“Is it coming along all right? Is it going the way you want?” he asked; and his voice was that of an awed whisper.

Colburn shifted the position of the top log and looked in the fire. “Is what going the way I want?”

Cricket stared a moment. At any one else the look would have been skeptical, but at Colburn it was uncertain.

“Maybe I oughtn’t to ask,” he said, and rubbed the ankle of his right foot with the hot slippered sole of his left. “I don’t mean about the Tuber part. If you’d been born all over you couldn’t look weller. But I mean about her. Golly, she’s beautiful! Does she ever make you feel you’d kill a person if he hurt

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her? I feel that way sometimes when I look at her, but I reckon she's contrarious like all the rest, when the notion hits her. Mr. Pepperpot says women can't help being contrarious. It's in 'em, and they can give a man more trouble than he'd stand for if he could help it, but he can't help. I didn't mean to ask you what I oughtn't. I was just a-hoping—Would you like me to tell you about Teenie?"

Colburn nodded, took up his pipe, lighted it, and began to smoke. Under the excitement and eager interest in his new surroundings he had felt the heart of the boy was filled with something well hidden and yet absorbing, and until it was unburdened he would be restless. He must let it out.

"It's good to have you, old man." His hand for a moment was laid on his little friend's. "I knew you'd come when you could. When did it happen, Cricket?"

"A week ago yesterday. You hadn't been gone but five days when she was took worse. She didn't say much, but I knew, and I couldn't sleep nights for wondering what I could do, and there warn't anything I could do; and then one day I opened that envelope you gave me. I hadn't ever seen that much money before, and I spent it—spent every bit."

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The words came solemnly, came as if their wickedness and wastefulness were understood.

"I gave it to you to spend—"

"I know, but not that way. You told me to use it when I needed it, and I bought a grampophone with it. I used to tell her about the moving pictures and the songs the machine would grind out, and she couldn't understand, and she wanted awful bad to hear one. When I saw all that money I went over to Wakefield and bought one. It cost twenty dollars. And when I was coming back with it I saw some pink roses in a shop, prettiest roses I ever saw, and I went in and bought a dozen of 'em. They cost four dollars. It didn't seem much then. Didn't anything seem much. All I was thinking 'bout, I reckon, was just trying to make her laugh once more, and she did laugh. She kept one of them roses in her hands all the time. One was in them when—

"I'm going to pay you back. I didn't think you'd mind if you could have seen how she loved to hear that thing. The funny pieces she didn't care much for, but the soft ones— All day I'd play it for her, 'cept when she was asleep. One night she asked me to hold her up, and I held her, and she said no matter what folks told me when I got to be a man, not to let

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'em make me think she wouldn't be waiting, and that morning just about sun-up she—she went away.”

A log dropped on the andirons, but Colburn let it alone. Cricket changed his position.

“The rest of the money I give Mis' Lemmon so the last things could be right.” He sat up. “Once I heard a preacher spiel off a lot of hot air about heaven. You'd 'a' thought he'd just come from it, and you knew he didn't know a thing about it, but—but you're bound to know there's one when somebody is a-waiting, ain't you, Mr. Colburn? I reckon them that thinks there ain't one haven't got anybody waiting. What's that picture up there?” Cricket's finger pointed to “The Huguenot Lovers.” “What's that girl tying her handkerchief round that man's arm for?”

The picture was explained, and then a little longer talk was allowed of how Cricket had told Mr. McKenzie of his intention of coming to Piping Forest. His confidence in his ability to get there somehow, notwithstanding he had no money, was as unwavering as Mr. McKenzie's unconcern as to whether it would be convenient for him to be a guest at the Doctor's home was calm and cool. Mr. McKenzie wanted to see Taska. He liked to talk to Colburn, and,



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moreover, the Doctor seemed to be a man of sense. With Cricket as a bodyguard they had started two days before.

Half an hour later, having put out the lights, Colburn stopped for a moment by the cot on which Cricket was soundly sleeping and looked down on it.

“Faithful unto death,” he said, and of all his friends he knew not one for whose coming there would have been a gladder, warmer welcome.

## XXIII

### THE WHITE ROSE

AS naturally as if their surroundings were those to which they had long been accustomed, Mr. McKenzie and Cricket fitted into their new home without request or explanation, and at their calm assumption of welcome Taska and Colburn had first been amused and then perplexed, and a little later understood.

With the Doctor their coming was accepted as naturally as by the new arrivals. As long as there was a spot on the place that could be utilized it must be made ready. When complications occurred Jane straightened them out, and to the matter he gave no further thought. Colburn, however, gave it many, and on the Sunday following his arrival, when Cricket, for whom a little packing-room had been emptied, came to him, he thought it best to tell him he would have to go to school; but the boy anticipated him.

"I reckon you think I got a lot of nerve," he

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said, sitting down in a high-back chair and twisting his feet around its rungs, "coming here like this and eating other folks' food and not even saying thank you out loud. But I'm a-going to work it out, and that's what I want to talk to you about, if you got time to listen."

"Plenty of time. Peg away."

Colburn, who had been shaving when Cricket came in, went on with his task. "I've been intending to tell you that I am ready to take you to school as soon as you're ready to go. I didn't want to hurry you."

Cricket took out of his pocket a piece of soiled paper and a stub of a pencil. "School closes in June, don't it?" The figures on the paper were looked at uncertainly.

"Some schools—yes."

"Well, it's April now. Fourth of April. Time I got there 'most half of it would be gone, and I'd be a donkey in an airship trying to find out what I was at, and before I found it I'd have to come away. If you wouldn't mind my waiting, I'd like to stay on and work my board out till it's time to go next fall. I've been looking round, and there's a lot to do 'bout here. The man what runs the farm says labor's scarce as Christian charity, and the cows sometimes go dry 'count of nobody to milk 'em.

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I don't like to milk, but I like it better than beating on folks, and some days when they don't need me here I can hire out to somebody else and make something for some clothes, maybe. I don't need much 'cepting shoes, and 'twill be barefoot time 'fore long." He stopped and looked out of the window. "I can eat with Mr. Acker, he says. Breakfast is at sun-up and dinner at twelve, but if I wash good and save the shoes, do you reckon"—he hesitated, and his face flushed—"do you reckon Mis' Bagley 'd mind if I have supper with you all?"

"I'm very sure she wouldn't." Colburn put his razor away carefully. "We will want you with us, and I guess you're right about not going off this session to school. They need help badly here. There's no system. Nothing is organized, and the work on the farm is a scrambled-eggs affair that has neither beginning nor end. The Doctor has no time to give to things of that sort, and Acker's head is pretty nearly hollow."

"He ain't had anything put in it for a long time, and if 'twas put he wouldn't know what to do with it. Mr. Pepper-pot told me a man told him if you was sent up into heaven or down into hell you'd start a company **doing something**—angels if you could get 'em, and devils if you

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couldn't. Why don't you take a hold on things 'bout here, Mr. Colburn? Farmers and mount'neers need a leader same as all other folks."

Colburn, who was having trouble buttoning his collar, laughed. "I know as much about farming as a monkey of music. Besides, I am a guest here, and I imagine it would be wiser to keep out of comment and criticism." The ends of his cravat were pulled to proper length for tying. "But you and I are going to start a partnership right now. Being older, and having been longer on the job called living, I'll be the senior member of the firm, but as the junior you're to do your part and report to me from time to time. I'm glad you want to get to work. There's a good deal you can do. While we're partners I'm to send you to school, furnish you clothes and a certain amount of money each month for things you may need. You can choose your life-work. Perhaps it would be well to decide on it as soon as you can, so that the college course may be undertaken with a view to it.

He was looking in the glass, and his cravat was tied carefully.

"That will be my part, that and to stand by when you need me. And yours—" He leaned

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closer to the mirror, but his eyes refused to see their reflection. "It is not likely I shall ever have a son, and your part is to play square and be the man—I'd like my son to be. Is it a bargain, Cricket?"

The boy got up, and Colburn turned toward him. His hand was held out, but Cricket did not take it. Presently above his head he held up his own.

"So help me God," he said, huskily, "some day you'll say you wouldn't be ashamed if—if I was your son," and, turning, he ran out of the room and down the steps and into the silence of the woods.

In the Doctor's study that night Mr. McKenzie puffed away on a Piping Forest pipe and wriggled nervously in the chair whose spring was broken and in which he could not comfortably adjust himself; and presently he took from his pocket an envelope and threw it toward the Doctor on the other side of the table.

"Don't be a fool just because you think I'm one," he blurted, "and for the love of Heaven don't argue! I hate arguments! There was no time to write you when I found that little chap was coming, but I'm not an ass, and I know we've made you bundle up a bit. The only

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thing I've got more of than I need is money, and I've let you think I've come to sponge on you. I haven't. You can't feed and warm and dose and doctor that God-forsaken, broken-down bunch of humanity you've got scattered around here without money, and you haven't got it." His hand went out to prevent interruption. "Dominicker tells me you haven't had a new suit of clothes in two years—and, damn it all, I gave a thousand dollars last year to an Anthropological society! Why don't you let people know of this menagerie up here?"

On his feet the little South-Carolinian was now standing, beating with his right hand the ashes of his pipe into the palm of his left, but as the Doctor took out his spectacles, put them on, and looked at the check he had taken from the envelope, his eyes squinted nervously and his hands were put in his pockets to hide their twitching.

Dr. Grannere looked up, and into his face came color, but his eyes twinkled as he handed back the check.

"Piping Forest isn't Baywood," he said, "and there are no extras. Nor are you occupying a suite at a New York hotel. If you prefer to pay rather than be our guest, which Jane and I would be happy to have you be, then the price



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is the same as for the others. This would build a new cottage, build and furnish it."

"Then in the name of Heaven build and furnish it!"

On his breast the fingers of Mr. McKenzie made swiftly the sign of the cross, and restlessly he began to walk up and down the long room.

"Look here, Grannere, you and I have pretty nearly finished our journey. In the early part of it, when the blood was hot and the brain insolent, we pooh-hoohed a lot of things we were taught as children, thought we'd made a good many discoveries, thought we could run the universe with our eyes shut; but now we're no longer young some of those old things come creeping back. One of them is the Day of Judgment.

"Oh, I don't mean"—his hand was waved—"that I believe in a line-up or a roll-call or an open book with a God of Wrath presiding over it; but somehow I can't help thinking of empty hands. I've been a damned selfish whipper-snapper, and when I go it will be—it will be with empty hands! Don't be a pig because yours are running over. Give me a chance, Grannere! I'm going to stay here. I like the place. I've no gift for chumming with poverty-stricken, bed-ridden wretches. I

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don't like to see them, don't know how to talk to them, and I'm not going to pretend I do. If I'm sent to hell it won't be for hypocrisy! Build your cottage, and if it's not enough let me know. What did I do with that pipe? Vile tobacco! Whoever bought it ought to be hung!"

The Doctor got up. Taking out his watch, he looked at it, then laid the check on the table.

"A new cottage is badly needed, Mr. McKenzie. I will use your money to build it, and I thank you. Those who come to it will thank you also. What will you name it? All of the cottages are named for flowers. One of the patients, a young girl, gave the idea."

"What idea?" Mr. McKenzie turned sharply.

"The old idea that if on the journey of which you spoke just now we could not do great or wonderful or splendid things, if we could lessen but little the loneliness and weariness, the sin and suffering of our fellow-travelers, we still might plant a flower by the roadside. What will you call your cottage, Mr. McKenzie?"

The latter hesitated, and his eyes blinked rapidly. "Call it the White Rose," he said, huskily. "I never see a perfect one that I do not think of my mother. Call it the White Rose."

## XXIV

### CONFESSION

WATCHING her as, bareheaded, she walked the length of the box-bordered path and across the wide plateau which sloped abruptly down the mountain-side, he bit his lip, and then the frown faded and he smiled.

How long did she think she could keep this up? Since the night of the telling of the Doctor's story Cricket had been purposely appropriated, and for hours they had been out together; but never once had he been asked to join them in their long walks to school or settlement or mountain cabin, and in the house she managed with skill, consummately unconscious, always to have some one near. Once or twice he had caught, however, a flash of seeming protest, a gleam of beseeching appeal, a swift message to keep back what she must not hear; but he was not going to keep it back.

Up to this time his word to the Doctor could not be broken, but his promise not to tell her

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of his love was meant to hold only until he could talk with him again. For days this had been impossible. The arrival of Mr. McKenzie and Cricket, much sickness in the mountains, and many matters to be attended to had combined to prevent a personal talk, and not until the night before had he seen the Doctor alone since the evening in which he had told of Diane d'Estrées. The memory of its telling haunted him still and would go with him through life.

Taking out a cigar, he started to light it, then put it back in his pocket and went down the steps and through the gate, and followed the path which led in a roundabout way to the cabin of Solomon Hatch. Taska was going there. He had heard her tell Mrs. Bagley. He would join her and walk home with her. Cricket was at work; there was small chance of meeting any one on the road, and he would refuse to wait any longer. He had told the Doctor so last night.

Should Taska love him, the Doctor agreed no longer to withhold his consent to their marriage when the proper time for marriage came. He admitted having made inquiries in his own city concerning him, and he believed he could trust her to him. He could give no greater proof of confidence.

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Until the night grew late they had talked as man to man, as physician to patient, as friend to friend, and each to the other had spoken frankly and with no false reserve; and when he left he felt indeed that he had been behind the veil wherein are glimpsed visions never caught in noontide glare.

Lifting his head, he breathed deeply. March had done well her beating and blowing and shaking and dusting. In the sun-warmed air was April's subtle stirring of new life, and the faint fragrance of fresh-turned fields, and coming flowers of woods and hills, and springtime whisperings were wafted to him as he walked. A turn in the road brought him into a tiny by-path, and on the trunk of a fallen tree Taska was sitting.

With a quick upleaping of his heart he stood still; then he came nearer, and his hat was thrown upon the moss-covered ground.

"Taska!" His hands went toward her, and, stooping, he took hers from their tight clasping of the tree's rough bark. "Why do you not want me to tell you, Taska? Is my great love so little worth the hearing that you do not wish—"

He drew her to him, drew her from the tree against which she shrank. "You must listen, Taska, for I must tell you."

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"Don't! oh, don't!" Her hands made effort to free themselves. "I must not hear. I have no right to hear, and you no right to tell! You must not, shall not tell!"

With a swift movement he held her in his arms. "Your eyes have told me what you will not tell, and you are mine! You are going to marry me, Taska! You are going—"

Protestingly she made quick effort to draw away. "I cannot marry you, and you have no right—" Her breath came unevenly, but her head was held high. "I will not, cannot marry you!"

"Yes, you will"—his voice, too, was unsteady—"for I am going to marry you. Listen, Taska. Listen and look at me. Can you not trust me? Do you think my love is love that does not understand? We are going to be well; but, well or ill, we are each other's. The Doctor gives his consent—"

"How does he know that I—care?" Her face flamed.

"He doesn't know yet. There is to be no nonsense, Taska. We are not children. You have known long that I have loved you. Words are but one way of telling. There is much of which we must talk, but to-day—we need not talk of other things to-day. For us

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there must be honesty. Others may hesitate and spin fine theories. We must know if there be love enough—for what love may require. Forgetting all things else, do you love me, Taska?"

For a moment the bird above them ceased its singing and the wind its stirring. Then she raised her eyes.

"Yes," she said. "I love you."

Until the sun sank they sat upon the fallen tree-trunk and made confession of their long withholding, talked of their first days of meeting, talked of many other things, but of marriage she would not let him speak.

"Not to-day. Not for many days, perhaps," she said, and her eyes grew grave. "Is it not enough to-day that I have told you—what I had meant to never tell? I wanted to keep it back. Did you ever feel as if you would rather drift and drift and drift than go anywhere on earth?"

"No." In his eyes was strong guarding. "I do not like to drift. I always want to go somewhere."

"And I love to dream and drift." She sat up. "I intended to tell you I did not love you, could not, would not. I was going to be a very



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proper person, very righteous and correct, and instead"—she sighed, as if for her sex—"I told the truth."

Colburn laughed, and, lifting her hand to his lips, kissed it. "Had you decided on the time you were going to tell me, going to let me tell you?"

"No." She shook her head. "That would have been no use. I only wanted to keep it back as long as possible. There have been times when I was afraid you were going to order me to marry you—"

"I may do so yet." Again he laughed. "I have often wanted to, but I could say nothing until I knew my chance for the future. When did you find that I loved you, Taska?"

"Before I should. After I knew your engagement was broken I should not have let you come to Piping Forest. But I wanted you to be made well. I didn't want you to love me. I didn't want to love you, but I wanted very much to see you. Was I very wicked—Rives?"

After a while they started homeward, and in the twilight watched the stars come out. At the gate they stopped.

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“Don’t tell the Doctor-man yet,” she said.  
“I must think. It is not what another says.  
It is what one must know for oneself is the  
right thing to do. And I do not know. Don’t  
tell him yet.”

## XXV

### THE VISIT HOME

TWO weeks later in her room Taska was writing on the table she had turned into a desk. Glancing at the clock, she stopped and started to close the book, then ran her eyes over the pages just written.

“Early this morning he went away. It has been a long, long day, and to-night I have written him my first letter since—he told me. Florine left yesterday. She managed to stay the week out, but it was a trial. She doesn’t understand how I can endure a place of this sort. I don’t think she and Rives like each other very much. They were so polite. She knows, of course, and so does the Doctor-man. Rives has told him and I have told him, and he has been good—oh, more than good; but until I am perfectly sure I am perfectly well I will not marry. I have tried to see it all in the right way, the big way, the fair way, see it in Rives’s way, but all of us have our special stupidities,

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our personal perversities, as Pepper-pot calls them, and of all women I would be most miserable if I were a burden, a care, an interference—were in the way. Alone I can hide the disappointments, but to keep him back— He must go on, must use his power and ability. The world needs men like Rives. He is just beginning to see and understand certain things he had not realized before, and could we be together—”

She leaned back in her chair, and sudden tears stung her eyes and hung on her lashes. For a moment she was frightened. If the mere sense of his absence caused such childish surrender to loneliness, how were the years ahead to be endured? He had gone to his home to see about some business matters which were badly tangled, but in a week he would be back. In the fall he would go home to stay. He would be well; but she—would she be well?

His will was not easily surrendered. It would be difficult to oppose it. He wanted her to marry him in October, and he had brought her plans for the house he would build outside the city for her, plans he had sketched as suggestions for the architect, and that meant air and sunshine, and wise and beautiful living. But she must not marry him in the fall. Taking

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up the letter just written, she sealed and directed it, then, going to the window, leaned out a moment and looked up at the stars. On the horizon the moon was rising, and fitful clouds played over it, obscuring, revealing, and again obscuring; and, watching, she sent a message by it.

"I wonder how he is to-night?" At the moon she looked perplexedly. "The trip is such a tiresome one, and he isn't as strong as he thinks. I wonder—"

Hands on the sill, she looked long at the stars; then she threw them a kiss.

"Good night, Rives! If I knew you were quite comfortable, had what you needed— I don't believe you took your heavy overcoat, and April is so uncertain!"

She drew in her breath and left the window. "I wonder if I am going to be always wondering when he is in one place and I in another! Of me he is ever caring, but of himself—" She put out the light.

On the street, whose every building was familiar, Colburn walked to his office with the quick stride of former days and looked about him with eyes eager and alert. Each person passed was glanced at with something of hungry

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hope that he be a friend or acquaintance, but many were strangers, and only occasionally was he stopped and welcomed back.

Six months had passed since he had been upon this street where formerly he had known, or thought he had known, the majority of the men whose business houses or offices were upon it, men he had been accustomed to meet and greet in the day's doings; but if his absence had been noted there was scant evidence of it. It was a little upsetting that a matter so immensely important to oneself should be unimportant to others, and rather dismally it was dawning on him that by many it was not known, or had been forgotten, that he had been away.

"The clocks haven't stopped running because I didn't wind them up," he said, and nodded to the man who nodded to him. "A queer old place this world!"

"Hello, Colburn!" Some one slapped him on the back, and a hand was held out. "Glad to see you, old man! If you're as fit as you look you're in luck. When did you get in?"

Together they walked down the street, and bits of business were discussed and items of gossip given between the interruptions caused occasionally by a welcoming acquaintance, and

## THE HOUSE OF HAPPINESS

the chill first felt passed in the warmth of vigorous handshakes and friendly salutations. At the door of Ransome & Brothers a little group of old friends gave him hearty greeting.

On the edge of the group a man held out his hand. "I thought I hadn't seen you lately," he said. "Glad you're back. Been away a month or so, haven't you?"

"Been away six." Colburn shook the offered hand and joined in the laugh. "All together it has been ten months since I've earned my living, but six since I was last in town. Looks as if you've been pulling down and putting up a good deal lately. That's something of a scraper over there! I hate the beastly things, but suppose they're inevitable. Hello, Mr. Ransome! By George, it's good to see you again!"

Through that day, through the next few days, there were seen and heard a good many things that were not good to hear and see, however, and on the fourth Colburn's face was drawn and worn. For hours his business matters were gone into, and each day gave greater and more amazing evidences of Ralstone's crafty rascality. At Mr. Ransome's question as to how a man of Colburn's knowledge of life could have allowed such opportunities for dishonest manipulations



## THE VISIT HOME

as he had allowed Ralstone, Colburn turned to him.

"I was a fool," he said. "But I will always be that sort of fool. I never mistrust a friend."

It had been cleverly done. There was little upon which the hand of the law could be laid. With his power of attorney Ralstone had sold much of Colburn's stock, many of his bonds, and several pieces of his property—sold them when the market was low, and bought them again when it was high. During his absence abroad much of this manipulation had been done, through his direction, by his chief clerk, who, under Colburn's grilling inquiries and burning eyes, told a straight story, and from him much was learned of those matters that Ralstone had written him were a bit mixed. Upon receipt of his answer demanding immediate explanation Ralstone had again left town; and, though he had waited at Piping Forest some time for his return, he had not yet got back, he was told, and at the telling Colburn got up.

"When will he be back?"

"He may be back to-day. He wouldn't be, however, if he knew you were in town." The clerk had also risen. "I've a family, and I have been afraid to say anything, but I can't keep

## THE HOUSE OF HAPPINESS

on like this," he said. "I don't sleep at night. He makes me do the dirty work, and gets out of it by calling me a stupid fool before the people he has cheated. But you'll never catch him. He's made me live in hell. It was I who had to do the bickering for the Colesworth house. A nasty piece of business!"

"For the what?" Colburn turned so sharply and his voice was so curt that the clerk started nervously.

"Don't you know who bought it?"

Colburn shook his head. "I did not know it had been sold."

"Mr. Ralstone bought it. The owner was willing to sell at your price until Ralstone offered him, for a supposed client, a pretty big advance. Naturally, when he found he could get more he wanted more. You refused to buy. In less than a week it was Mr. Ralstone's."

The man shrugged his shoulders. "Were he here he'd make you think he'd done you a great favor, saved you from an unprofitable investment. He can explain away the deepest-dyed villainies of which a man is capable. He's a juggler, a wizard. He does his dirty work as cleverly as the man on the stage does things with cards and handkerchiefs and eggs;

## THE VISIT HOME

and all you can do is to wonder. Plausible!" He wiped his face. "I hope you haven't lost a great deal, Mr. Colburn?"

Colburn struck a match and held it to the cigar in his mouth. His fingers were not entirely steady, but his eyes were, and, watching him, the family-burdened clerk wondered what would be his next step. He was not a man to take treachery calmly. "I hope you haven't lost much," he repeated.

"A little over half of what I had when I went away." Colburn turned to the clerk and flicked the ashes of his cigar on the floor. "What is behind this?" he asked. "What was Mr. Ralstone's motive?"

"Several things, I imagine. You've made more money, and he hates your good name. You know he is to be married?"

"Married!" Colburn's voice was loathingly incredulous. "To whom?"

"To Miss McLean. Miss Isabel McLean."

Colburn stared. Turning to the door, he faced Ralston who was entering it.

## XXVI

### BACK AGAIN

**I**NSTINCTIVELY a step was made backward; but quickly Ralstone recovered himself, and gaily his hand was held out.

“Hello, Colburn! It’s bully well you’re looking. I’m glad to see you! When’d you get down?”

Colburn looked at the offered hand, but his own made no movement. On the flushed and handsome face before him his eyes fastened; then he took out his watch.

“I have only a few minutes,” he said, “but when I want a man to know the kind of scoundrel I think he is I prefer to tell him to his face even when other things have to wait.”

“Take care!” Ralstone’s arm curved as if to protect himself from a blow, and his face flamed. “You don’t know what you are saying. You—”

“I know very well what I am saying, and I have much more to say. What I don’t say my

## BACK AGAIN

lawyers will. With creatures of your class it is difficult for decent men to deal. Where is your private office? There? Well, go in it."

For an hour, in terms for which there was no regard for nicety of expression, Colburn whipped and lashed the at first pretendingly amazed and then cowering man whose mask was off; and later, with a movement of his hands which struggled with elemental impulse to kick with the foot, Colburn got up.

"For the rest," he said, "Mr. Eldridge will see you. In a few days he will bring suit, and naturally the papers—"

"For the love of God, don't!" The cry was one of terror. "I am going to be married. It will ruin me if the papers—"

"Expose you?" Colburn's hands dug in his pockets. "Then the lady you expect to marry will owe the papers a debt of gratitude she can never repay. Quit that!"

At the door he turned. There was but one spot in Ralstone's soul and body that quickened at a touch. Publicity was his one fear, one weakness, one dread and torment. "After lunch Eldridge will see you," he said. "If there is public discussion of a private matter you alone will be responsible," and without a glance behind him he was gone.

## THE HOUSE OF HAPPINESS

On the train a few days later he leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes as if to shut out all remembrance of recent experiences, but the fingers between the leaves of his magazine gripped its pages with nervous intensity. Each turn of the wheel was good to hear, each took him a bit nearer what seemed heaven indeed after the dark and ugly revealings of the days just gone, and his heart kept rhythmic measure to its sound.

They had not been all dark and ugly, these days that were past, however. His friends had been warm in welcome, and it had been as the drinking of a life-giving draught to be again at his desk, to feel once more in his hands the management of matters that needed him, and to be asked concerning measures that required judgment and skill in execution. In the fall he would again be actively at work, and he must work if Taska was to have that which he would not be content for her to be without.

With the passing of hours, the first uninterrupted ones in which he could face frankly the situation in which he found himself, reaction set in, however, and as darkness fell the realization of the loss of the larger part of his property came upon him with acute meaning. The amazement and unbelief caused by the revela-

## BACK AGAIN

tion of Ralstone's character had been followed by a fury of scorn and contempt for the man and his methods, and the loss of his money was at first overshadowed by the shock of his treachery. Had he in a moment of temptation, of impending personal ruin, stolen his money, he could have forgiven him. There were many forms of sin he could forgive, but hypocrisy was not one of them. A monk was never so hated by the devil as he hated a hypocrite, and to be used as Ralstone had used him made restraint difficult. Did he suppose his smooth words and plausible explanations would be accepted by a man of his type? With others such methods might work, but not with him.

Leaning back in his chair, he looked out of the window, and with eyes that saw not watched the swiftly passing fields and hills and occasional farm-houses, which in the soft shadows of the dying day were growing vague and misty, and presently his eyes again closed.

Before his marriage, some years ago, Ralstone had been engaged to Isabel McLean. Colburn had heard of it, but only as club or tea-cup gossip, and had paid no attention to it. For some reason the engagement had been broken. He had not seen Isabel. It was cruel and cowardly to let her marry a man thinking he was one



## THE HOUSE OF HAPPINESS

thing when he was most verily another, but under the circumstances he could do nothing. And above all things she wanted the Colesworth house.

For some while longer the car rushed on, and through each passing minute plans and purposes for work to be done filled and absorbed him. There must be money to give to Taska, do for her what was necessary. It was doubtful if she would ever be strong, and care that was infinite and unfailing must be her portion. To give it would be all he'd ask of life. As much as he wanted to be with her he would return to-morrow gladly if returning meant the taking up of his work, the rebuilding of what had been torn down. He would never be content with a subordinate position in his city, and until he had recovered what was lost he would be restless and ill at ease. He turned his head. The brakeman was calling out his station.

As he started to leave his seat, believing himself the only passenger to get out, he noticed a woman who had been sitting, quite hidden by the back of her chair, in the opposite corner of the car, get up, noticed also that her bags were in the porter's hands. Although closely veiled, about her was something familiar; and as she reached the platform and lifted her veil,

## BACK AGAIN

in the fitful glare of a lantern swung by a station hand, he recognized her.

As she saw him she gave a little cry and drew back; then she held out her hand.

"Oh, Mr. Colburn, take me to her! I don't know what to do or where to go. Take me—"

She swayed slightly, and Colburn caught and steadied her. He had never liked her. It was difficult to be patient with her sort of weakness, but his voice was gentle.

"Where shall I take you, Mrs. Woods?"

"To her—wherever she is. Where is it—the Piping Forest place at which she is staying? She must hold on to me, keep me from— Take me to her, Mr. Colburn!"

"To Miss Laird? Is it to Miss Laird you wish to go?"

She nodded, and, beckoning to Dominicker, who had come to meet him in the big old-fashioned buggy, Colburn led her to it, and put her in.

"The bags can wait, Dominicker. We must get this lady to Piping Forest." He turned to Mrs. Woods. "We will be a bit crowded, but the roads are fair at this season and the drive will not be very long. I will take you to her."

The drive had never seemed so long. During it but few words were spoken, for Colburn,

## THE HOUSE OF HAPPINESS

noticing how Mrs. Woods shrank at even a question concerning her comfort, soon ceased to make inquiry, and for most of the time only the sound of old Dexter's hoof-beats and the rattle of the buggy wheels broke the soft silence of the moonlight night.

It was after ten when the house was reached. As they drove up the door of the Doctor's office opened, and out of it sprang Cricket and ran toward them with a whoop and cheer. On the steps stood Mr. McKenzie and the Doctor, and in the doorway, with the light of lamp and fire behind her, was Taska, and at sight of her Colburn's heart gave a great leap.

"To the front door, Dominicker," he said, and, leaning forward, caught Cricket's hand. It was good to be home again, good to feel the warmth of waving welcome, good—

"Tell Miss Laird to come to the big door, Cricket. I have a friend of hers here." He turned to Mrs. Woods, who at sight of Taska had uttered a sobbing cry. "In a moment—Take care, Dominicker—she's fainted!" And with a quick movement he caught her as she fell.

## XXVII

### VICTORY

NOT until the next night did Taska understand why Mrs. Woods had come. Through the first one and the day that followed she was too ill to talk, but on the second she laid her hand on Taska's.

"I must tell you," she said. "Make her go out," and she nodded at the nurse.

For a moment Taska hesitated. Perhaps it would be more unwise to restrain her than to let her unburden what was so greatly troubling, and after a few words to Miss Neilson she came to the cot which had been placed in her room.

"For just a little while," she said, and, sitting down in a low chair, took Mrs. Woods's hands in hers, "and then you must go to sleep. Tomorrow you can talk longer."

"I can't sleep—and I must talk." Half rising on her elbow, Mrs. Woods looked at the girl before her. "I started away with him, Taska. I tried not to. I told him after I got a divorce

## THE HOUSE OF HAPPINESS

I would marry him, but he doesn't believe in divorce. He doesn't believe in law of any kind—that is, any kind that interferes with personal liberty. If a man and woman love each other that is enough, he thinks. You can't argue with him. He is too clever; he sweeps you aside, laughs at the littleness of your views and ideas, which he says aren't ideas, but opinions of small-minded people. For the children's sake, for Howard's sake, I tried to hold out. When with him I seem to have no will of my own, but when away I know it would be—as you said. He tires of everybody. Last week he told me he would soon leave Baywood. It was doing him no good, and he was going West. I must go with him, he said. There we could live our own lives, be our real selves, and forget the stupid conventions by which people are made hypocrites. I tried—I did try, Taska!”

The latter bent over the bed. “I know you did,” she said, and her voice was very gentle. “It was very hard.”

The pretty, dark-brown eyes stared as if they had not heard aright, and suddenly the quivering face was buried in the pillows and for a moment was low sobbing.

“I thought you were going to say I was

## VICTORY

wicked and beyond pardon. I wanted to be with him. I started. We got as far as New York, and there in the hotel, while I was waiting for him to come for me to take the Western train, I seemed to see you, to see what it was going to mean—to see my children—and I ran away. For hours I rode in a cab trying to know what to do. If I saw him again I would yield again. I couldn't think. I couldn't go back to Baywood or to my home. There was nowhere for me to go. I wanted you to hold on to me, and suddenly I remembered where you were. I caught the night train and made connection with the one that brought me here. I have been wicked—as wicked as if I had sinned—because I wanted to go with him; but, oh, Taska, do not give me up! Do not give me up!"

On her knees Taska slipped her arms around the suffering woman and held her close.

"Give you up?" she said. "Why should I give you up? What is one woman that she should give another up?"

Low sobbing alone broke the room's stillness, but presently Mrs. Woods again spoke, slowly, wearily.

"But they do. In a man they forgive anything. In a woman nothing. Women are so

## THE HOUSE OF HAPPINESS

hard, Taska. They never seem to understand. And you—you cannot understand. You are good."

"Am I?" Taska shook her head. "How do I know? How does any woman know? I haven't had your struggle, your temptation, nor perhaps have the women who would judge you. I do not judge you. But now you've won you can see how sorrowful and useless it would have been, and you're going to wipe it all out and begin again."

"Begin again! How can a woman begin again?" Mrs. Woods's lips quivered. "I should live in fear of being found out, of Howard's knowing—of—"

"No, you wouldn't, for you're going to tell him. You can't live honestly with a person when there is something you're afraid of being found out following like a specter behind you. You've been overboard, but you're not drowned, and there's a great deal of difference."

"Tell him!" Mrs. Woods sat up in bed and pushed the soft brown hair from her eyes. In them was terror. "Tell him? I shouldn't dare! He'd hate me, send me away. He'd—"

"Has his life been so free of sin that he can cast a stone at you? Listen!" Taska took the twitching, trembling hands in hers. "It is



## VICTORY

harder to forgive a woman than a man. Something in us shrinks differently at a woman going wrong, but the sin is the same; and you, too, have something to forgive, perhaps. You must tell him everything. I will write him you are here, if you wish, and when he comes I will tell him that you—that you won out. Shall I write him to come for you?—to come and take you home?”

In the pillow the tear-stained face was buried, and for some moments there was stillness, then the frail fingers on the bed slipped into Taska's.

“Tell him—I must see the children—tell him—”

At the door Miss Neilson stood waiting, and, seeing her, Taska got up.

“I think your patient will sleep well to-night,” she said, and, stooping, she laid her hand lightly on the pretty brown hair. “The morning is going to be warm and lovely, Mrs. Woods. If the Doctor will let us we'll drive to Peaceful Valley. It's only a short distance away, and just before we reach it is the most wonderful view. One can see things clearly from there that are misty everywhere else. Good night.” And with a nod Miss Neilson understood she left the room and went down-stairs to Colburn, who was waiting.

## THE HOUSE OF HAPPINESS

For a long moment her hands were held in his. "You give yourself freely to all others," he said, "but I have to wait for the odd moments that are no one else's. I've scarcely seen you since I got back."

"At breakfast, dinner, and supper you've seen me, and after supper, and yesterday we had a little walk. She's been so sick I couldn't leave her. Please don't scold. I'm—"

"I know you are." Her face was scanned perplexedly. "The Doctor should not have let you stay with her so long. The cave-men had advantages over us. There are times when a woman ought to be owned outright. If you were mine I'd—"

She looked up. "I am yours." Her breath caught in her throat. "I think I'm rather to pieces to-night. I'm frightened. So many strange things can happen, do happen. So many lives go wrong." She shivered slightly. "It is warmer outdoors than in here. Let's go out awhile. I need the stars and the stillness—and you!"

In the sheltered corner of the deep pillared porch they talked of many things. Of past days and those immediately ahead Taska spoke freely, but of the future, of marriage, she would not let him speak.

## VICTORY

"Is it not enough to know—what we do know?" she said, after a long pause in which they watched the clouds cover and veil and hide the moon which shone serenely down upon the tree-filled lawn. "Is it not enough? Tell me"—she leaned forward—"of everything that happened while you were away. I don't believe you missed me as I missed you!"

Much he told her, but some things he left untold. He had lost money during his absence from business, but in the fall he would be again at work, and in time the loss would doubtless be made up; and then he took from his pocket a ring.

"Before I went away you would make no promise, but you will wear this for me?" The circle of perfect pearls was put on her finger. "There are doubtless times when diamonds suit you, but it is always with pearls I think of you—always of pearls—"

With a little cry she held out her hand, held it far off that the moonlight might play upon the ring and catch the warmth and color of its stones. "Of all jewels pearls alone I love!" she said, and her breath was drawn in. "They have always been a passion. As a child I was barbaric, and in my dreams I'd wind them in my hair and around my throat, and they

## THE HOUSE OF HAPPINESS

were always to be—*the* ring. How did you know?"

"How did I know?" He drew her to him. "I cannot tell—unless Love told me. You will wear it? Will—"

She drew away, and her face shadowed. "For this summer we were to make no promise. We were to wait and let time show us what was wise and right." Slowly the ring was drawn from her finger. "I cannot wear it yet. In the fall we will know, and in the spring be sure."

"In the spring! Do you think I am going to wait a year—think I am going to be in one place and you in another? I'll do nothing of the sort!"

"Dear cave-man—yes, you will!" Taska got up. "We are not children; we do not make denial of our love, but until I know I will not be a care, a continual anxiety, I cannot marry. Don't make it harder for me—"

"And I—" He too was standing. "If I should be a care, a continual anxiety?"

"You?" Her voice was incredulous. "You couldn't be! Were you sick, did you need me, it would be different. In a few months, if you are careful, you will be well again. But I—of myself I am not sure."

Footsteps on the graveled walk made them

## VICTORY

turn. The Doctor was coming toward them. As he reached the porch he stopped at the foot of the steps, and Taska went down to meet him.

"I did not know you had gone out to-night," she said. "Is anybody ill?"

"Not very. Jim Hatch came home to-day." He took off his hat and wiped his forehead. "The county never had a tougher boy in it than Jim, but the calf has been killed and the rejoicing was a little too much for his mother. Women are a queer compound, aren't they, Mr. Colburn? It is too cool for you out here, child. You had better go inside."

At the door she stopped. "I must go up," she said. "I want to answer Mr. Holman's letter. I think he will be glad to know Mrs. Woods is with us. Jack Harnish, too, must know—and that means Baywood."

## XXVIII

### CONSPIRATORS

SPRING had gone. Gone also was the summer, and the early September nights on the mountain-top were cool and clear. As twilight fell the locusts had piped shrilly of heat to-morrow, and lazily the birds had chirped good night, and softly the faint tinkle of cow-bells had lingered in the air; but now all was still again, and on the lawn, flooded with moonlight, under a great oak tree the Doctor and Mr. McKenzie were sitting.

“As far as I can see, she’s going the way of most women—the cantankerous way!” Mr. McKenzie lighted a fresh cigar, throwing away the half-smoked one he had been holding. “She won’t engage herself to him because she thinks he should be free until she is absolutely well again. He don’t want to be free! And she’s well now. You’ve told me so, told her so. Got to be careful and all that, but—Well, she’s a woman, and that means no use

## CONSPIRATORS

trying to understand her! God Almighty doubtless made women for more than one reason, but the chief one at times seems to be the tormenting of men. There are occasions, suh, when, if they weren't women, they ought to be shook! I tell you when a man's the sort Rives Colburn is—oh, I'm not saying he's all a man might be— Who is? But when a man of his kind loves a woman, a man you can trust—”

“Do you think his love for her is greater than all things else on earth? Greater than the fulfilment of all other desires? Great enough for sacrifice?”

“Sacrifice!” Mr. McKenzie gave the silk cap on his bald head a jerk that left it sideways. “What's sacrifice got to do with it? Where's the need of it? I love the child too much to trust her life to a man unless I know the stuff he's made of, and I tell you she'll be safe with him. When is he coming back?”

“To-morrow.”

“And Taska?”

“Next week. It will be good to have her back; good to have both back. He has been working too steadily, I am afraid. The two weeks he asked for seemed reasonable. There were some important business matters to be settled. He has been offered recently the



## THE HOUSE OF HAPPINESS

presidency of a big banking and trust company, something bigger than he had hoped to get for years, perhaps. I admire his confidence because it is based on preparedness and ability, but I wonder at times if business ambitions will not unduly dominate, absorb, overpower as the years go by. Perhaps I am too exacting." The Doctor's hand brushed back his soft white hair, and his eyes grew wistful. "It is the thing we are apt to forget to-day—that marriage is no fair-weather matter, and the love that lasts, no matter what betide, alone justifies it. I wonder if he would be willing to give up the position just offered him if it should be necessary for Taska to go West?"

"Taska—go West!" Mr. McKenzie turned in his chair so bouncingly that his cigar fell from his lips. "I don't understand you, suh! What's West got to do with Taska? Is—is anything the matter?"

Dr. Grannere moved his chair closer to the one beside him and put his hand on the arm of his friend.

"You must help me, McKenzie. I want your advice. I want—"

Closer the two heads came together, and the sharp little eyes of Mr. McKenzie blinked rapidly into those of the Doctor, in which were

## CONSPIRATORS

the glow of a vision, the gleam of adventure, the light that dares for a high stake; and for a half moment neither spoke.

“They are dear to us, McKenzie. We have long loved Taska, and that we have become willing for her to marry Mr. Colburn is the best evidence we could give of our belief in him, our affection for him. But we must be sure their love is of the noble sort.”

“How are we going to be sure?” The words came snappily, and Mr. McKenzie gave his chair a jerk closer that he might hear better. “Time alone is the test. Nothing human can tell. We’re too old to butt in on things of this kind. We’d better stay out of it, you and I. Taska has said little to me. Colburn has said little, but I can see a good deal more than they tell. For some foolish quixotic reason Taska refuses to marry. She ought to be made to marry!”

The Doctor shook his head. “No. She can’t be made to marry. But it is not of Taska I am thinking. I know the child’s heart, know what she would do were it not for an abnormal fear of a possible return of ill health in the future—ill health that might interfere with Colburn’s career and cause him suffering, cause that for which there might be penalty beyond

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pardon. She needs no test. Did she think he had to go away and fight this thing over with strangers, live alone in anxiety and possible pain, she would put all things else aside and go with him. But if she had to go—would he go with her?"

To his feet Mr. McKenzie jumped, and his long, lean fingers gripped the Doctor's shoulders and the round silk cap fell off his head. "Speak English, man! Speak English! You've got something in your mind!" The high, thin voice cracked and broke. "If it is a good thing, I am with you, but I must understand!"

With his firm hands the Doctor pushed Mr. McKenzie back in his chair. "I am going to tell you," he said. "I want you to tell me if I am just a dreamer, just a believer in things men say are not so great to-day as in the yesterdays, or if I shall take the risk? We have been young and now are old, McKenzie. We have seen much of life, had many of its good things, but its best things we have never known. Home in its highest sense—wife, children—it is these which give meaning and purpose to life; but marriage to-day—I am afraid of it. I am old and cowardly, perhaps, but as a garment is put on and off, so the bonds are made and

## CONSPIRATORS

broken; and something seems very wrong. Always I am wondering what it is—”

“I’m not.” Mr. McKenzie sat upright. “Clear as sunlight. People marry to-day like they married yesterday and are going to marry to-morrow, because they think they think something which isn’t so. I’m not surprised at the unhappy marriages, only surprised there are not more of them. Men and women are human beings, and at times they forget it. Selfishness, pig-headedness, boredom—boredom deserves sympathy, suh—vanity, pride, stupidity, bad temper, the love of money, ambition, bad health, selfishness—first and last and all the time it is selfishness. All of these things mean—”

“Lack of love. By different names we mean the same thing, I imagine. In this case are we sure of the love?”

“And didn’t I ask you how we were going to be sure of it?” Mr. McKenzie’s voice was petulantly impatient. “Each day brings its own test, its own trial. I’ve known people to live together forty years and then separate. A man is one thing to-day, another to-morrow, and a woman’s another thing every day in the week! This case, like the rest, must prove itself. But what’s your plan? You’ve got one. For the

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love of Heaven, talk, man. I never could endure waiting!"

The Doctor smiled. "I am thinking of sending Taska to Arizona. For a year, presumably. I am thinking of telling Mr. Colburn it is essential that she go, but she must not know it is essential. If he wishes to marry her and go with her he must make her think, I must make her think, it is he that needs to go. For her health it is not essential, but for her happiness it may be. I shall not alarm him. And I am thinking of telling Taska it is advisable for Mr. Colburn to go to Arizona for an indefinite stay. She is not to let him know it is indefinite, however. He must not be discouraged. Naturally, he will not ask her to share the loneliness of the place to which he must be exiled. Each must think the other's condition necessitates the change of climate to complete their cure. With Colburn it will mean the loss of a big business opportunity. Or rather he will think it does. With Taska it will clear the way to do what her heart bids and her fear prevents. As a wedding gift a letter will await them in Arizona telling them what I have done—and why. Am I a quixotic old fool, McKenzie? Have I the right?"

On his feet Pepper-pot again was standing,

## CONSPIRATORS

hands in his pockets, heels digging little holes in the grass, and eyes staring in the face of his friend.

"You're going to make him think she must go away; going to make her think he must go away; going to find out whether theirs is the sort of love that endureth all things—or the usual sort. It's a damned daring piece of business, but"—his hand went out—"it's worth it. She'll begin to pack as soon as you tell her. But he—"

"If he hesitates— No, I won't say hesitates. He wants to make money that life may be smooth and beautiful for her, and to give up this opportunity for which he has long been making ready will be difficult. He has learned much of late. I want him to learn more. If he is not willing to put her first in life, thinks it wiser to wait until her return, he is not worthy of her. I shall tell him before I tell her." The Doctor got up. "Usually I am not afraid, not uncertain"—the gentle voice quivered—"but the future of others—it is a serious matter to meddle with it. For the test I have no right to make, perhaps—I may be taking an unfair advantage. But they must know, McKenzie, the many-sidedness of love!"

The moon went under a cloud, and overhead

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the wind in the trees made soft whisperings, and about them fireflies darted in the darkness. For a moment they looked at each other as men look who have long been journeying, and then Mr. McKenzie drew closer, and, arm in arm, they went slowly across the lawn and into the study, and inside they closed the door.



## XXIX

### THE MESSAGE

AT his window, hands in his pockets, Colburn looked first at the sky and then the mountain-peaks in the distance; at the valley below, and the fields which sloped in zigzag fashion down the hill-sides near by, and as he looked his eyes narrowed.

He had been back a week—the longest week of his life. If Taska had not come yesterday he would have gone after her. To see for himself if there were outward indications of the rather unsatisfactory condition in which the Doctor reported her as being in when she left for a visit to her sister's camp in the Adirondacks possessed him unreasonably; and the old impatience at restraint, the old impulse to brush away whatever interfered with purpose or desire, required control of which he was hardly capable, and for days he had been on a tension which made sleep impossible at night.

If she had not been as well, why had the

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Doctor let her go away? He turned from the window and began to walk up and down the room. His question was silly. Taska wanted to go, felt she ought to go. Her sister had some rights. The change might be helpful, and the Doctor was not to blame. Still, he ought to have known before she left that she was not quite so well. Why hadn't the Doctor told him? To save him worry or anxiety was meant for kindness, perhaps, but he did not wish to be saved anything concerning her. She was his, and it was his right to know every shade of her condition.

Certainly he should become accustomed to being knocked in the face, accustomed to being held up when the road ahead seemed straight and clear. But did a man ever get used to the overthrow of plans, to the sudden facing of a high, hard wall? He had come back from a visit divided between his home and New York a bit light in the head, perhaps, from the taste of returning power, from the more than satisfactory arrangements made for future work. Before him were big things to be done, and with keen eagerness he wanted to begin on them. This morning the Doctor had called him in his office and told him Taska must spend a winter in Arizona.

The blood had surged to his temples, purpled

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them in the sharp and sudden fear that filled his heart, but there was no serious danger, he was told. Her resistance must be built up for future safety and assurance, however, and to so build it she must go to a climate that could do for her what the mountain-top could not. It would be unwise for her to spend the winter at Piping Forest, nor must she go back to the city and take up her work again, nor to her sister's, where society was unescapable.

"When must she go?"

He asked the question with his back to the Doctor and face at the open window. Outdoors the sun had darkened, and the birds had stopped their singing, and his throat seemed closing. "When must she go?"

"The middle of October will be soon enough, I imagine."

For some minutes Colburn stared out of the window, and the silence grew long and oppressive. With yearning eyes the Doctor, in his chair near the book-covered table, watched the tense figure of the man he had learned to love, and his heart beat as beats the heart of youth, but he said no word. All men must go down into the valley before the hilltops can be reached, and all men must tread alone the winepress that is theirs.

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Presently Colburn turned. "It will take me a week to arrange matters," he said. "At the end of it we can be married and leave at once if you think best."

The Doctor's arm slipped, and a book was knocked from the table, and in his chair he leaned back as if something had snapped. It had been greater than he thought—the tension of his test, and his fear had been unjust! For a moment he said nothing. On his lips words died, for his lips were trembling. He was a foolish old man—a foolish old man—but in his heart was music strangely sweet.

"Sit down, my son." He wiped his lips, and drew a chair close to him. "There are several things we must talk about."

When, later, he left him, Colburn did not go into the house. Not yet could he trust himself to see Taska. For hours he walked the mountain paths or sat in the pine woods on a fallen tree-trunk and tried to see clearly that he might act wisely, but for some time there was only hot rebellion that this added anxiety and disappointment should have come. The gripping fear that first had frozen his heart had died away in the Doctor's assurance that Taska's condition was not serious, and that a stay in Arizona was advisable as a precautionary rather

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than a curative measure. And as his fear lessened there had been for a moment swift thought that his business interests should not suffer because of this precaution on the Doctor's part; that it would be wiser perhaps to go on with his work and provide for her the means by which all that she might need later could be supplied. But at the thought had come another. He saw her alone in a far-off land, and decision was made quickly.

The Doctor was right, however, in saying Taska would not marry him did she think it was on her account the Western climate must be tried. She was singularly stubborn and unreasonable in the position taken, and because of it he had no scruples in marrying her under a wrong conception on her part concerning him. It would not be sympathy or pity that would make her consent to be his wife. It would be love's surrender; and love confessed had made her his. He would tell her, as the Doctor said, that he must go to Arizona.

To put behind him the opportunities ahead, to resign the position just accepted—a position whose duties were not to be assumed until November—had meant a sharp and bitter struggle. Against him were the forces of the past which had made personal success the pri-

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mary motive of action, and with them were the insidious questionings of wily prudence, and alone the new vision had to pierce the darkness. Separation might have been accepted temporarily had it been advisable and inevitable, but under present conditions it could not be accepted. Of herself she took too little care. He must be with her. With any one else there could be neither peace nor content concerning her.

Coming back to the window, he again looked out of it. In the eastern sky masses of soft clouds, white and gray, wrapped and wound themselves into queer and curious shapes, and tumbled out of the blue into curling heaps of foam and spray; and in the west the sun sank slowly, a flaming ball of golden red. Footsteps to the right of his window made him look out. Down the box-bordered path Taska was walking slowly, her eyes on the ground, and on the perfect skin, in which to-day was no hint of color, the long lashes made a dark half-circle. She wore a white dress open at the throat, and around her shoulders was a soft, thin scarf of blue, and as the sun sank her hair caught its last gleaming and gave back glints of shining light. She was thinking deeply, was indeed lost in thought.

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At sight of her his face whitened, and for a moment he hesitated; then he turned and, going out of the room, joined her as she reached the gate, out of which they passed to the little by-path that led to the ridge from which could best be gained the view she loved so well.

She held out her hand, and in her face crept color. "I'm glad you came," she said. "I thought I wanted to be alone, but I didn't. I wanted you." She looked up. "Do you really believe this past month had just thirty-one days in it?"

He shook his head. For a moment surging love and pity and fear and rebellion silenced him, and words would not come. She was so fine and fair, and suddenly he felt helpless to shield and protect her. The hand in his was crushed with something of fierceness; then he dropped it and took her in his arms and lifted her face and kissed it.

"Taska!" he said. "Taska!"

She did not resist his kisses. Hitherto she had refused to let him claim her as his own, but no longer she refused. Presently she drew away.

"You have not answered me," she said, and made effort to hide with smiling the quivering of her lips. "Florine was indignant. She was



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really hurt, but I wanted to come back the day after I went away. What's the use of living if you can't be with—with those you love best?"

"No use."

He looked down at her, and again they began their walk, and in silence reached the top of the ridge, and under its spreading oak tree sat down and looked across the valley to the encircling hills, and then he turned to her and took her hands in his.

"Has he told you, Taska?"

She nodded. "Pepper-pot is right in a good many things he says." Her breath came unsteadily. "One of them is that everybody carries something to extremes. My Doctor-man carries caution." Her fingers tightened on his, and in her eyes was love upleaping and protecting care. He tells me it is only that you may run no risk of a set-back, only that you be made absolutely well again that you must go to Arizona for the better climate and the care Dr. Dunroe can give you." In her voice was brave effort to fight down the fear in her heart, the fear he must not feel. "I know you understand, know you will not let it depress you, but—" Her voice broke. "If only it had been I that had to go! It wouldn't have mattered about me, but you— To put aside your

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work which means so much, to give it up and go away— If only I could go and let you stay!”

“That’s the only lucky part about it—that it is I and not you who must go!” His voice was unsteadily cheerful, and in his heart was quick, tumultuous leaping. “The work can wait. I like to work, but there is always plenty to be done, and when I come back I’ll find another job, I imagine. It isn’t that, Taska.” Into his face crept shadow. “The part I cannot trust myself to talk about is leaving—you—”

Her head went up. “Leaving me?” She turned her face toward him. “Do you suppose I am going to let you go out there alone?”

By strong effort his eyes were turned from her, and her hands dropped.

“I cannot ask you to marry me. My future is uncertain. I have no right—”

“Haven’t you?” Hands outstretched, she laughed with quivering lightness. “Then I shall marry you without being asked. I could not stand the year of separation. I am going with you. Surely—oh, surely you would not make me stay away!”

Long they sat and talked. Overhead the wind in the trees rustled rhythmically, and a wood-thrush called to its mate, and over the

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mountains the mist rose soft and shadowy. Presently Taska looked up.

"A long, long time ago, when I was a little girl"—she brushed the wind-blown hair from her eyes—"I read a story of a woman who had had a great sorrow. For a while it stunned and paralyzed and embittered her; then she began to watch life, watch people, and to wonder why they were happy or unhappy, and for years she could find no answer. And then one night she had a dream, and she was told that she must go about the world and give a message to all men and women. And the message was that each soul must build the house in which is happiness, and it is made of things that are not bought and sold. For a long while I could not understand. We needed money so dreadfully, and I loved and wanted the beautiful things that money buys. I love them now. But later, when I, too, began to know life, I knew her message was true." She looked up. "It is the only house one can take from place to place and live in anywhere. It is going to be in Arizona—going to be—"

"Wherever we are wise enough to build it!" In the clear eyes Colburn smiled gravely. "I have much to learn, Taska, and you must help me build."

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A long, low whistle, soft and sweet, broke the silence, and, looking up, they saw Cricket.

“You must tell him.” On her feet Taska turned to Colburn. “He will be so glad to know and will see the happy side. And we, too, are going to see—the happy side!”

## XXX

### THE WEDDING GIFT

CRICKET pushed the books and magazines on the table out of the way, drew the ink-stand nearer to him, put his pen in it and held it suspended in his fingers as he looked down at the sheet of paper on which was marked in old English letters the name of his present abiding-place, and presently he nodded to it.

"I'm not a-going to do it! You ain't equal to anything like that, Josephus Hammill, called Cricket, neither is Mis' Lemmon, and it isn't any use wasting good stuff just because it's handy, and your writing wouldn't match it. You just get back to the kind you're used to!"

Getting up, he hesitated, then one by one the things on the table were taken off and laid on chairs or on the floor; the pretty cover hung on the foot of the bed, the pen and ink put back, and in place of the awe-inspiring stationery a pad of cheap paper was taken from a bureau drawer and laid on the table.

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"I reckon this room was meant for a lady." The blue eyes wandered in first one direction and then another. "That little desk over there certainly wasn't made for a fist like mine. My elbow on it don't know what to do with itself, and I can't write lessen I got plenty of room to swing a pen in. Maybe a battle-axe ain't so mighty, but I'd rather have one in my hand any time than a pen. I'm a knock-kneed nothing when it comes to writing. Just plain every-day things is the onliest ones I can put down, and frills and flourishes get stuck at the start. But I got to write her. I promised."

Again sitting down, Cricket nibbled the end of his pen, pulled the pad of paper close to him, tore off a sheet or two, wiped his forehead with a new handkerchief drawn from the pocket of his new suit, looked down at his new shoes, ran his fingers around the inside of his collar, and straightened his cravat, and then, with a violent plunge of the pen in the ink-bottle, began to write in a large, round hand.

' DEAR MRS. LEMMON,—We are here. Been here a week. Your postal card saying you were afraid maybe Miss Taska wasn't getting on so well as you hadn't heard from her lately came just before we left, and this is to say she couldn't be getting on weller this side of heaven. And she ain't hankering

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after a somewhere heaven, being in the one what's made of things what makes it, and liking it very much.

They were married on the 26th of October, just one year to the day when I was a-sitting on the fence and he come up and set by me. They didn't know each other was living that day, but they did that night, and that's why they got married on the 26th.

It was an awful beautiful marriage. It was in the morning, and the sun just tried itself, and there wasn't a thing that wasn't a-shining. Looked like every leaf on every tree was a different color, and the birds knew. I could tell by the way they sang. You ought to seen the table. It groaned like tables used to do before the war, Bradford said. I never saw so many good things to eat in my life, and, thinking I mightn't ever see 'em again, I ate some of all. I was sick some, but I wasn't sorry I ate. I had a grand time doing it. There weren't many people. Miss Taska's sister and her husband came, and her sister cried all the time the minister was a-saying the words, and Mr. Pepper-pot blinked so bad I thought his eyes would pop out. Her aunt came, too, and her best friend, and some of Mr. Colburn's friends, or relations—I don't know which. She had on a white dress and some pearls around her neck. He gave 'em to her, Mr. Colburn did, and, Lord, she was lovely! When the Doctor put her hand in Mr. Colburn's I'd 'a' run if I could. I ain't ever seen a face what looked like his when he did it, and her sister's crying didn't twist you up like his smile did. Somehow I can't get 'em out of my mind,



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them two, Mr. Pepper-pot and the Doctor. They went down to the station to see us off, and the last thing I saw they were standing together and they were arm in arm.

I didn't know whether I could go with them, as I had to get educated, but as soon as they told me they were coming up here, unbeknownst to them I wrote to the Doctor I'd heard them mention and asked him about schools, and he wrote me there was a good one less than seven miles from this place, and I asked Mr. Colburn if I couldn't go to it instead of the one he was thinking about, and he said I could. He's a corker, that man is. He knows how a fellow feels, and he knows you can't study good if anything is on your mind, and they'd have been on mine every minute if I couldn't have seen for myself how they were getting on.

They are living in a little house what's got vines on it, and it's warm in the daytime, but at night they have fire, and I'm to come over every Saturday morning from school and stay till Monday. If I was to stick a whole paper of pins in me, one by one, I wouldn't be sure this was me, Josephus Hammill, called Cricket, and most every night I wonder how it happened.

And I thank you for taking care of me till they found me, and I hope I won't ever forget, and that remembering won't always be words. My letters will come every month same as they been doing, and please, 'm, will you spend the dollar what I'm putting in this for flowers for Teenie. The 12th is her birthday, and I'd like pink flowers, please, 'm.

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She loved pink. I hope the grass is growing well on it. If it ain't, won't you ask Bob Hatcher to look after it for me, and tell him if he will I'll send him something in my next letter. Good-by.

Respectfully, CRICKET.

*P. S.* I've had my new string more'n a month, and it hasn't got but two knots in it. Miss Taska says everybody will come on if they'll stick on. C.

Down in the little sitting-room, by the shaded lamp on the table drawn close to the fireplace from whose logs leaped flames of red and gold and purplish pink, Colburn was reading. Presently his paper fell to the floor, and with eyes that saw not he looked into the fire. The paper was from his home city, and in it he had just read an account of the marriage of Isabel McLean and Merriweather Ralstone. The Colesworth house was Isabel's at last.

His refusal to let his lawyer give publicity to Ralstone's rascality was due to no sympathy or consideration for Ralstone. A hypocrite and thief deserved no sentimental mercy, but for Isabel's sake he had been silent. Something was due Isabel. He looked around the little room with its simple furnishings, its books and flowers and firelight. Certainly it was a contrast to the rooms awaiting Isabel.

The door opened, and Taska came inside,

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but as Colburn got up and placed a chair for her she shook her head.

"The moon is magnificent to-night. I want to walk. Tell Cricket we are going out." In her hands was a small package. "This is the Doctor-man's wedding gift," she said—"his Arizona present. I had a letter from him to-day in which he told me to get this from Dr. Dunroe. He had sent it ahead in his care. I wonder what it is? What do you think?"

Colburn laughed. "That's a woman, all right. A small flat something may be anything that is small and flat." Out of her hands he took the package, then hesitated, and after a half-moment laid it on the table. "If we're going to walk we'd better go at once. Later it gets rather cool. When we come back we'll open it. The Doctor has his own way of doing things. Perhaps this is a poem he wants us to read—"

"Dear Doctor-man!" Taska raised her eyes to her husband's. They were wet and shining. "Were he with us I would ask for no one else." Her hand went out to his.

Stooping, he kissed her, smiled in her eyes. "I wish he could be with us, but with you—I ask for no one else!"

THE END















